



**TYNDALE**  
UNIVERSITY

3377 Bayview Avenue  
Toronto, ON  
M2M 3S4

TEL:  
416.226.6620  
[www.tyndale.ca](http://www.tyndale.ca)

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John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace & Its Import for Christian Mission

by

Chris Payk

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## Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this work to my beautiful children Kent and Anna Payk.

I pray that you will respond whole-heartedly to the sweet gentle wooing of the  
Lord Jesus Christ's grace.

May this work be a means of that grace.

Spring 2009

## Abstract

This thesis is an examination of John Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. In this work, the following question has been addressed: What did John Wesley think prevenient grace was and did, and what contribution does this Wesleyan doctrine make to contemporary Christian mission? The first chapter is a review of the current state of the research in the field of Wesleyan theology on the topic of prevenient grace. The second chapter traces the sources of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace from the Scriptures, through the Church Fathers, to the Church of England and on to Wesley. The third chapter examines Wesley's usages of the term "preventing grace" in order to provide an answer to the first part of the research question: What did John Wesley think prevenient grace was and did? The fourth chapter provides some missiological implications of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace in order to answer the second part of the research question: What contribution does this Wesleyan doctrine make to contemporary Christian mission?

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# Chapter One

## Introduction and State of the Research

### 1.1 The Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to clearly answer my research question: What did John Wesley think prevenient grace was and did and what contribution does this Wesleyan doctrine make to contemporary Christian mission? Wesley used the term “preventing grace” for what is today understood as “prevenient grace” – the grace of God which comes before any human action. Wesley defined the term “prevent” in his *Complete English Dictionary* as “to come or go before”<sup>1</sup> The term stems from a Latin derivation of *prae* meaning “before” and *venire* meaning “to come.” A common synonym for prevenient is “preceding,” and so a number of Wesleyan theologians speak of “preceding grace” as a contemporary way of expressing the term preventing or prevenient grace. In this study, I will attempt to keep the missiological implications of the doctrine connected directly to what John Wesley actually said about what prevenient grace does.

### 1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is threefold. First, the study breaks ground in examining the influence of the Scriptures on John Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace as evidenced by Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes*, as well as the influence of the Church Fathers Augustine, Macarius, and Ephraim Syrus; the Second Council of Orange; and the Vincentian Canon on John Wesley's doctrine

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *The Complete English Dictionary* (London: Strahan, 1753), n.p. Although *The Complete English Dictionary* was published anonymously, it is popularly accepted that the dictionary was one of Wesley's works. See Herbert McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Publishing, 2001), 326, fn. 96.

of prevenient grace. Albert Outler, in his impressive critical edition of John Wesley's sermons, indicates the influence of the Scriptures, the Fathers, and the councils and canons on Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace, but these influences have never been explored in depth by any researcher thus far.

The second significant aspect of this study concerns the missiological implications which emerge from Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. There is nothing unique about a study that describes Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace,<sup>2</sup> nor is there anything unique about a study indicating that this doctrine has missiological implications.<sup>3</sup> The significance of this study lies in keeping the benefits which Wesley indicated flow from prevenient grace directly tied to the present day missiological implications in order to make a thoroughly Wesleyan contribution to the contemporary missiological dialogue.

The third significant aspect of this study is that, based on these missiological implications that flow from the benefits of prevenient grace, a theological framework is proposed as a tool for churches to be able to evaluate whether their engagement in mission is fighting against (destructive), ignoring (redundant), or aligning with (effective) the operations of God's prevenient grace that are already at work within a culture(s).

### **1.3 Definition of Prevenient Grace & Missiological Framework**

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<sup>2</sup> The two major studies are Charles A. Rogers, "The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley" (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1967) and Greg Crofford, "Streams of Mercy: Prevenient Grace in John and Charles Wesley" (PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The two major studies are Mark P. Royster, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective" (DMiss dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1989) and Tae Hyoung Kwon, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace: Its Import for Contemporary Missiological Dialogue" (PhD dissertation, Temple University, 1996).

As noted above, prevenient grace, following Wesley's own use of the term, is “the grace which comes or goes before.” In this thesis, I will use the term “preventing grace” where Wesley uses the term, but when I allude to “the grace that comes before” I will use the term “prevenient grace” in keeping with the majority of Wesley scholars.

The missiological framework I am proposing to provide a church with to evaluate its engagement in mission and how this relates to God's prevenient grace already at work in a culture is threefold:

- a) Destructive mission: work which “takes away” from the benefits of prevenient grace.
- b) Redundant mission: work that does not improve upon the benefits of prevenient grace or work already accomplished by the benefits of prevenient grace.
- c) Effective mission: work which “improves upon” the benefits of prevenient grace.

The warrant for applying this theological framework to the church's engagement in mission comes from an idea Wesley put forth in his sermon, *An Israelite Indeed* (1785), the notion that grace can be “improved” upon or “taken away” by God due to human responses to previous grace: “whoever improves the grace he has already received, whoever increases in the love of God, will surely retain it. God will continue, yea, will give it more abundantly: Whereas, whoever does not improve this talent, cannot possibly retain it. Notwithstanding all he can do, it will

infallibly be taken away from him.”<sup>4</sup> Thinking within a Wesleyan framework on the church's engagement in mission as a response to grace, the church can “improve upon” or “take away” from God's prevenient interaction with humanity. This mission effort can therefore be classified as destructive, redundant, or effective.

#### **1.4 State of the Research**

The doctrine of prevenient grace has become a significant topic in the last-half century of Wesley studies. Although Charles Rogers was the first to conduct a thorough study of prevenient grace in John Wesley's theology, other scholars, particularly Albert Outler, had noted the importance of the doctrine in Wesley's thought before Rogers.<sup>5</sup> However, it was Rogers who first gave a precise answer based on detailed research as to what Wesley understood prevenient grace to be and to do. In the last quarter century the amount of research and number of debates over what prevenient grace is and does and its missiological implications have greatly increased. Below I will describe only the most significant historical developments in Wesley studies which dealt with the doctrine of prevenient grace in the last half-century.

##### **a) The Work of Charles Rogers**

The first thorough treatment of the doctrine was by Charles Rogers in his 1967 PhD dissertation entitled, “The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* (Bi-Centennial Edition; 35 vols. projected; Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 3:284. Within this thesis, the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley's Works will be abbreviated as *Works* [BE]. For more of the same idea in Wesley see *Works* [BE], 3:207 and 283-284.

<sup>5</sup> For Outler's early (1964) notice of the importance of prevenient grace in Wesley's theology see Albert C. Outler ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 33, and 273, fn.1.

Theology of John Wesley.” Rogers' work provided significant research on some of the Church of England sources which influenced Wesley's theology on prevenient grace.<sup>6</sup> Rogers indicated that prevenient grace was a concept that developed in Wesley's theology over time from the “Early Wesley” (1725-1735 – his Oxford Methodist days) in which Wesley held that regeneration is brought about through prevenient grace at work in baptism;<sup>7</sup> to Wesley's theological change (1736-1738 – his experiences in Georgia and with the Moravians leading to Aldersgate) which influenced Wesley to move the location and role of prevenient grace to before justification in the Way of Salvation;<sup>8</sup> and finally to the “Later Wesley” (1738-1791 – Aldersgate to death) who held that prevenient grace is at work all along the Way of Salvation.<sup>9</sup> Rogers thought that Wesley believed that prevenient grace prepares people for the gift of faith by leading them to repentance and despair over human efforts to attain righteousness, thus “ending all human efforts and self-dependence.”<sup>10</sup> Rogers was the first to comprehensively recognize the benefits that Wesley ascribed to prevenient grace including the awakening of human reason; the re-inscription of the Moral Law; the enlightening of conscience; and the restoration of free will.<sup>11</sup> Charles Rogers' work on prevenient grace was a seminal contribution to Wesley studies; however, his analysis of Wesley was limited due to an absence of a critical edition of

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<sup>6</sup> Rogers, “The Concept of Prevenient Grace,” 25-58. For an overview of the English sources Rogers indicated influenced John Wesley, see section 2.5 of this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 142-143.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 167-195.

Wesley's works at the time. Rogers was unable to access several of the documents in which Wesley mentions “prevenient grace.”

#### **b) A Comparison of the Work of Albert Outler and Kenneth Collins**

In the 1980s, Albert Outler, having completed his critical edition of Wesley's sermons, pinpointed in Wesley's writings two ways in which Wesley understood God's prevenient grace. The first, a more narrow function of prevenient grace, is the initial illumination of sinners to their spiritual reality due to Christ's atoning work and the conviction of sin applied by the Spirit. The second, a more broad function, is the universal nature of all grace as being prevenient so that in the divine-human relation, God's activity is always prior to human reaction.<sup>12</sup> Outler notes that early in Wesley's career as guide to the Methodists, he grounded prevenient grace in baptism, later he linked it with repentance, and in his later years he correlated it with the order of salvation as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

Kenneth Collins has responded that Outler's second usage of prevenient grace can be misconstrued in such a way that it eliminates the need for qualitative growth in grace along the Way of Salvation. Collins argued that this seeming lack of concern for evidenced growth would be inconsistent with Wesley's overall theological concern since Wesley was radically committed to encouraging people along the Way of Salvation, from responding to God's initial callings in prevenient grace to moving on to experiencing justifying and sanctifying grace. Therefore, Collins called for further clarification on the place of prevenient grace

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<sup>12</sup> Albert Outler, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 105.

<sup>13</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:156-157, fn.3.

in Wesley's Way of Salvation. Collins writes, "At the very least, then, the initial activity of the Holy Spirit in calling and convicting the soul must be distinguished from that grace that makes one holy."<sup>14</sup> Collins also notes that in almost every one of Wesley's usages of the term prevenient grace, Wesley is utilizing the more narrow definition of prevenient grace that Outler identifies as initial illumination and conviction of sinners by God.<sup>15</sup>

Randy Maddox has provided a helpful resolution to this debate by distinguishing between the two functions of prevenient grace in John Wesley's theology. Maddox notes that Wesley refers to the narrow function of prevenient grace in his specific doctrine of Prevenient Grace (capitalized), that is, the grace that comes prior to justification, and that when Wesley draws on the broad function of prevenient grace, it encompasses the idea of the prevenience of all grace.<sup>16</sup>

### **c) A Comparison of the Work of Randy Maddox and Kenneth Collins**

Throughout the 1990s and continuing to this day, there is an ongoing debate between Randy Maddox and Kenneth Collins over the nature and function of prevenient grace in Wesley's theology. The heart of the debate centers on the issue of Maddox's and Collins' interpretations of "the faith of a servant" and "the faith of a son" in Wesley's sermons. Maddox argues that in the mature Wesley (post-1765), when Wesley writes about faith, he is referring to "the faith of a servant," a term which implies a degree of acceptance of the servant with God and

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 40.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Collins, *Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 76.

<sup>16</sup> Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 84.

that, since acceptance means “justifying acceptance,” the servant is therefore justified before God to a degree because acceptance means “justifying acceptance.”<sup>17</sup> Collins argues that although the mature Wesley came to realize that the faith of a servant is accepted by God to a degree, such faith does not constitute what Wesley called *justifying* faith in Jesus Christ, since in Wesley's late sermon, *The Discoveries of Faith* (1788), Wesley identified “the faith of a servant” with “the spirit of bondage,” claiming that those who have the spirit of bondage abiding on them are still under the wrath of God.<sup>18</sup> Collins goes on to say that although there are degrees of acceptance in Wesley's soteriology, Wesley presents justification by faith as a single event due to the fact that one cannot be “a little bit justified by faith”; rather, one is either justified by faith in Jesus Christ or is not.<sup>19</sup>

In a later article, Collins asserts that Maddox blurs the distinctions that Wesley made between prevenient grace and initially sanctifying grace (regenerating grace) in Maddox's description of the acceptance the “faith of a servant” receives before God.<sup>20</sup> Maddox indicates that Collins has misread Wesley in a typically “Western” fashion by emphasizing the “unilateral action by God” in preference to the more Eastern “prevenience” of grace to all human

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<sup>17</sup> Randy Maddox, “Continuing the Conversation,” *Methodist History* 30, no. 4 (July 1992): 237.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Collins, “A Reply to Randy Maddox,” *Methodist History* 31, no. 1 (October 1992): 52.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Collins, “Recent Trends in Wesley Studies,” *The Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35, No. 1, (Spring 2000): 68. Collins and Maddox wrote articles simultaneously to be published in the *WTJ* in prelude to a dialogue at the Wesleyan Theological Society in 2000. Collins indicates that Maddox reads Wesley through a “gradualist” soteriological framework that is more accurate to modern liberalism than to Wesley. See page 85.

response, the latter which Maddox claims is more accurate to Wesley.<sup>21</sup> In Collins' most recent response to this debate, he indicates that a synergistic (co-operant) understanding of prevenient grace must be caught up within the larger paradigm of “the sole activity of God” in the Protestant tradition in order to be accurate to Wesley's notion of prevenient grace.<sup>22</sup> Based on evidence in the Wesley texts, I will attempt to bring some resolution to the Maddox-Collins debate.

#### **d) The Work of Herbert McGonigle**

Herbert McGonigle was the first theologian to significantly explore the historical context in which Wesley developed his doctrine of prevenient grace. In 1994, McGonigle completed his PhD dissertation entitled, “John Wesley – Evangelical Arminian,”<sup>23</sup> which he later adapted into a book entitled, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism*. McGonigle argues that Wesley inherited his doctrine of prevenient grace largely (though not exclusively) from the deposit of Church of England theology he inherited through the tutelage of his parents Sammuel and Susana Wesley at the Epworth Rectory and through his later studies at Oxford University. McGonigle indicates that Wesley refined his doctrine of prevenient grace amidst the Calvinistic controversies during the Methodist Revival which, McGonigle argues, allowed Wesley to find a *via media*

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<sup>21</sup> Randy Maddox, “Prelude to a Dialogue,” *The Wesleyan Theological Journal* 35, No. 1, (Spring 2000): 96. Maddox indicates that Collins is reading Wesley through a fundamentally Western perspective and that Collins therefore subsumes Wesley’s Eastern emphases into Western categories. See page 91.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, *Holy Love*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert McGonigle. "John Wesley-Evangelical Arminian" (PhD dissertation, Keele University, 1994).

(middle way) between Pelagianism and Calvinism.<sup>24</sup> According to McGonigle, although Wesley had a “reservoir of tradition” to draw from, it was the conflicts with the Calvinists of his day that pressed Wesley to develop his doctrine of prevenient grace in his own unique way.<sup>25</sup> Utilizing McGonigle’s contextual research, I will show the development of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace within its historical context.

#### **e) The Work of Greg Crofford**

Greg Crofford is the most recent researcher to write on Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace and his is the most comprehensive analysis of the doctrine to date. In 2008, Crofford completed his PhD dissertation entitled, “Streams of Mercy: Prevenient Grace in John and Charles Wesley,” under the direction of Herbert McGonigle.<sup>26</sup> Crofford extended the work of previous researchers on Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace in four main ways: by showing the influence of several other English theologians on John Wesley, including the Quaker Robert Barclay;<sup>27</sup> by making the first detailed analysis of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace using the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley’s works; by providing the first analysis of Charles Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace; and by giving the first detailed analysis of the doctrine beyond the Wesleys in subsequent Wesleyan theology. Crofford concluded his study by quoting H. Ray Dunning in saying that prevenient grace was for Wesley “a theological category

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<sup>24</sup> McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace*, 321.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>26</sup> Greg Crofford kindly provided me with an advance electronic copy of his dissertation in order to complete the research for this thesis.

<sup>27</sup> Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 22-85. For an overview of the English sources Crofford indicated influenced John Wesley see section 2.5 of this thesis.

developed to capture a central biblical motif.”<sup>28</sup> Crofford's research is limited due to the fact that the roots of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace in its Patristic sources did not fall within the scope of his dissertation. His findings however are original, especially in regard to English theological sources. Crofford does identify the need for research in the roots of prevenient grace in the Patristic and Medieval traditions.<sup>29</sup>

#### **f) The Work of Mark Royster and Tae Hyung Kwon: Implications**

Both Charles Rogers and Greg Crofford indicated that a discussion of the missiological implications of prevenient grace was beyond the scope of their theses, but they did indicate that the implications of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace are a prime area for missiological research.<sup>30</sup> Mark Royster and Tae Hyung Kwon have already made two significant contributions regarding the import of prevenient grace for missiology. In 1989, Mark Royster completed his DMiss dissertation, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective.” Royster came up with two broad, yet important, conclusions in his study: 1) Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace is integrally linked with his understanding of the whole Way of Salvation and 2) since God's prevenient grace if responded to positively is always followed by his saving grace, “understanding existing patterns of response is crucial for effective evangelization.”<sup>31</sup> Royster indicates that all people are in relationship both to God through prevenient grace and to the culture(s) in which they are located, a

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<sup>28</sup> H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), 338 (as quoted in Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 267).

<sup>29</sup> Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 22, fn.3, and 269.

<sup>30</sup> Rogers, “The Concept of Prevenient Grace,” x; Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 264, fn. 147.

<sup>31</sup> Royster, “Missiological Perspective,” n.p. (Abstract)

culture(s) which expresses collective (usually negative) responses to grace which significantly impact individual responses to grace.<sup>32</sup> Should individuals break with the collective responses to grace that the culture(s) in which they are located offer to God, they stand in radical discontinuity with their culture(s) due to their non-conformity to it.<sup>33</sup> With Wesley's assumed constancy of grace, as argued by Royster, the individual responses to grace that people can have are almost limitless in variety. Church leaders in their own particular contexts must be discerning in order to observe and cultivate grace responses which are both in harmony with prevenient grace and are in continuity with the existing contextual patterns of grace-response inherent within the culture(s).<sup>34</sup> To extend Royster's work and in order to provide a helpful rubric for the church to evaluate its efforts in mission, I propose as already indicated that church leaders use the following lens through which to discern if each person's response to grace is taking away (destructive), ignoring (redundant), or improving upon (effective) the operations of God's prevenient grace operative within a person's life and within the culture(s).<sup>35</sup>

In 1996, Tae Hyung Kwon completed his PhD dissertation entitled "John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace: Its Import for Contemporary Missiological Dialogue." In his study, Kwon concluded that 1) Methodist theology, in large part due to prevenient grace, "reveals a transcultural character and flexibility in context which is conducive to the general spread of the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>35</sup> See section 4.2 of this thesis.

gospel”;<sup>36</sup> 2) A human being's relationship with God is the primary relationship which relativizes all human contexts and provides focus for church mission; and furthermore, prevenient grace “when incorporated into various interpersonal and contextual relationships” is the “conduit” through which church mission can be effective globally;<sup>37</sup> and 3) Prevenient grace is fundamentally connected within the whole Way of Salvation and is expressed in a wide variety of human responses. Kwon claims that the church's mission is to “incorporate the doctrine of prevenient grace in its social, cultural and worldview models so as to attain a contextually sensitive ministry.”<sup>38</sup>

To extend Kwon's work and in order to provide a helpful rubric for the church to evaluate its efforts in mission, I argue that church leaders would be wise to analyze the ministries of the church in order to evaluate a) whether or not the divine-human relationship in each ministry is the primary concern in order to focus,<sup>39</sup> and b) how contextually sensitive the church's social, cultural, and worldview models are so that they can be effective in communicating the realities of the gospel. By discerning the activity of God's prevenient grace in a church's culture(s) to the degree possible, leaders may be able to evaluate how contextually sensitive church ministries are in relation to their host culture(s). These ministry activities and models may then be classified as taking away (destructive), ignoring

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<sup>36</sup> Kwon, “Missiological Dialogue,” 204.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>39</sup> One must be discerning in sensing post-Enlightenment individualism in this evaluation. The positive divine-human relationship evidences itself in positive human-self, human-human, and human-creation relationships.

(redundant), or improving upon (effective) the operations of God's prevenient grace operative within the culture(s).<sup>40</sup>

Royster's and Kwon's conclusions provide insightful missiological data. For example, Royster constructively locates prevenient grace within Wesley's entire Way of Salvation indicating that the benefits of prevenient grace must be in continuity with the end goal of the Way of Salvation – Holy Love.<sup>41</sup> Kwon perceptively indicates that prevenient grace does not render the church's mission superfluous. In fact, God's prevenient grace provides the very ability for the church to respond to God's mission.<sup>42</sup> However, the major limitation to Royster's and Kwon's work is that both researchers only preliminarily sketch Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace and then develop missiological implications from the doctrine, not fully developing the benefits which Wesley indicated branched off from prevenient grace.

That Royster and Kwon did not extensively develop the benefits Wesley attributed to prevenient grace is likely due to the fact that their dissertations are missiological in nature. Due to the nature of this thesis as a combination of historical theology and missiology, I will attempt to connect the missiological implications of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace directly to what he said prevenient grace does. Where Royster and Kwon develop benefits in line with what Wesley said prevenient grace does, I will appropriate this research for the implications which I suggest.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

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<sup>40</sup> See section 4.2 of this thesis.

<sup>41</sup> Royster, "Missiological Perspective," 33. Royster uses the term "full salvation."

<sup>42</sup> Kwon, "Missiological Dialogue," 193-194.

Judging from the state of the research in Wesley studies over the past fifty years, prevenient grace is a theological concept which has become increasingly significant in the Wesleyan tradition. There has been a historical development of the doctrine far past John Wesley right into the present day. In light of the debates in the research on prevenient grace, it is critically important to look at what Wesley actually wrote about prevenient grace in order to bring some conclusions to the debates. In this thesis I will carefully examine Wesley's actual usages of the term "preventing grace" in his writings with reference to the benefits this grace gives to human beings. There are tremendous advantages to writing this thesis after Rogers' and Crofford's research on what Wesley claimed prevenient grace to be and do and in light of Royster's and Kwon's suggestions of some of the missiological implications of the doctrine. One significant advantage is that it extends the work of Rogers, Crofford, Royster, and Kwon by allowing for synthesis of these four researchers in order to articulate missiological implications of prevenient grace that are developed directly out of the benefits Wesley connected with prevenient grace.

But first, in order to more fully understand Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace and to see how he developed it out of a broad church tradition, it will be helpful to investigate the various sources which Wesley drew upon in developing the theological category "preventing grace."

## Chapter Two

### Sources for John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace

#### 2.1 Introduction

John Wesley of course did not simply invent the concept of prevenient grace; rather, he appropriated a long-held belief of the church that God's grace is a gift which comes to all humanity before any human effort in order to restore the divine-human relationship devastated by the effects of the Fall. Wesley believed the concept of prevenient grace could be found in the Scriptures, and he encountered it in the Church Fathers and in his own Church of England.

In this chapter I will outline the most important sources Wesley drew upon in speaking of prevenient grace in order to show that his teaching on prevenient grace was not new but rather flows in continuity with what the mainstream consensus of orthodox Christian theology has been throughout the ages on this matter. That prevenient grace stands within the orthodox Christian tradition is important for the overall goal of this thesis – identifying missiological implications – because the mission of the church must always be in continuity with the historic beliefs of the universal church.

#### 2.2 The Scriptures

John Wesley taught that the Scriptures were the primary source and final authority for Christian theology. In the often quoted preface to his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, Wesley writes,

The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is

the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all writings of men, however wise or learned or holy.<sup>43</sup>

With Wesley's high view of Scripture as the authoritative source for theology,<sup>44</sup> it is important to investigate whether or not his doctrine of prevenient grace has biblical foundations. In Wesley's most ambitious biblical-theological works, the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* and the *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, he gives significant insight into how the Scriptures were a source for his theological views, including his doctrine of prevenient grace. The *NT Notes* were completed first (1755) and they, along with John Wesley's *Standard Sermons* contain the theological standards for Wesleyan theology.<sup>45</sup> These standards were formed when doctrinal controversy became a problem among Methodist preachers in 1763. In response to this doctrinal controversy, John Wesley crafted a "Model Deed" which set forth the doctrinal norm for Methodist orthodoxy. In this Model Deed, Wesley charged the Methodist preachers to "preach no other doctrine than is contained in Mr. Wesley's *Notes Upon the New Testament* and the four volumes of *Sermons*."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1755; repr., London: The Epworth Press, 1941), 9. This work will be abbreviated as *NT Notes*. John Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament* will be abbreviated as *OT Notes*.

<sup>44</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyze Wesley's hermeneutics to see whether or not he held to the primacy of Scripture in the actual formation of his theology. However, it is clear that he *conceptually* viewed Scripture as the primary source and final authority for theology, as can be evidenced by the prefaces to his *NT* and *OT Notes*. For two significant analyses of Wesley's hermeneutics, see Scott Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995) and Donald Bullen, *A Man of One Book? John Wesley's Interpretation and Use of the Bible* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Oden provides a very strong case for the *NT Notes* and the *Standard Sermons* along with the Articles of Religion for the American Methodists containing the doctrinal standards for the Methodist Church. See Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:42. The four volumes of sermons included the 44 standard sermons when the "Model Deed" was first written in 1763, but Wesley changed the number of standard sermons to

The *NT Notes* are Wesley's brief interpretive comments on his revised version of the Authorized Version (KJV); he had written the notes for the average person who had little or no formal education, to increase their ability to understand the New Testament.<sup>47</sup> Wesley explained that he abridged several commentaries on the New Testament including John Albert Bengel's (*Bengelius Gnomon Novi Testamenti*) which was the primary source for the *NT Notes*; Dr. Heylin's *Theological Lectures*; Dr. Guyse's *Practical Expositor*; and Dr. Doddridge's *Family Expositor* along with adding his own insights in order to complete his *NT Notes*.<sup>48</sup>

The *OT Notes* were completed in 1765, ten years after the *NT Notes*, and were never specified in any of the editions of the Model Deed, presumably one factor contributing to their decreased emphasis in later-Wesleyan theology.<sup>49</sup> Wesley heavily relied on two commentaries he abridged as he prepared the *OT Notes*: Matthew Henry's *Exposition of the Old and New Testament* and Matthew Poole's *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*,<sup>50</sup> with Wesley himself contributing less than 1% to the original content of his *OT Notes* according to Robert Casto's

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53 in 1770 and then to 100 in 1788. It appears that Wesley's "standards" were open to change over time, but the *NT Notes* were always included in the "Model Deed."

<sup>47</sup> Wesley was more confident in his biblical Greek knowledge than in his biblical Hebrew. He provided a modified translation of the Authorized Version's (KJV) New Testament in his *NT Notes*, but he did not provide a translation of the Old Testament in his *OT Notes*; rather, he relied on the AV for the Old Testament text.

<sup>48</sup> *NT Notes*, 7-8. For more on the historical development on the *NT Notes*, see Timothy Smith, "Notes on the Exegesis of John Wesley's 'Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament,'" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 107-13.

<sup>49</sup> For more on the *OT Notes* curious absence in much of Wesleyan theology after Wesley's time, see William Arnett, "A Study in John Wesley's Explanatory notes upon the Old Testament," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 8 (Spring 1973): 14-32.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of Rev. John Wesley* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1829-1831. Repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 14:247-249. "Preface" to the *OT Notes*. The Jackson Edition of Wesley's Works will be abbreviated as *Works* [Jackson].

analysis.<sup>51</sup> As a methodological principle, unless there is an original Wesley work on a particular subject, Wesley's extracted and edited works such as the *OT Notes* should be considered as primary evidence of his theological views on a subject.<sup>52</sup>

In the Authorized Version's Old Testament, Wesley found fifteen instances of the Hebrew verb, **mqd** (qadam), translated as “prevent” (or “preventest,” or “prevented”) in the sense of “to come or go before.”<sup>53</sup> In these instances, Wesley did not find Preventing Grace to follow the “narrow sense of the term,” to use Maddox's distinction; rather, he found the Scriptures to point to the broad sense of the prevenience of all grace in the Old Testament as evidenced by his *OT Notes* on the Psalms and other passages:<sup>54</sup>

Psalm 21:3 – For thou preventest him with the blessings of goodness: thou settest a crown of pure gold on his head.

Wesley's Note: *Prevent* - Crowning him with manifold blessings, both more and sooner than he expected. *With* - With excellent blessings.

And in

Psalm 59:10 – The God of my mercy shall prevent me: God shall let me see *my desire* upon mine enemies.

Wesley's Note: *Prevent* - Thou wilt help me sooner than I expect.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Michael Casto, “Exegetical Method in John Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*,” (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1977), iii.

<sup>52</sup> Here I am following Charles Rogers' perceptive methodology regarding the use of Wesley's edited material to discern Wesley's theology. See Rogers, “The Conception of Preventive Grace,” 61-62. The last editions of Wesley’s works and modifications in later writings should of course be considered as Wesley’s views on subjects as his thought matured over time.

<sup>53</sup> See 2 Samuel 22:6, 22:19, Job 3:12, 30:27, 41:11, Psalms 18:5, 18:18, 21:3, 59:10, 79:8, 88:13, 119:147-148, Isaiah 21:4, Amos 9:10 in the KJV. The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* defines **mqd** (qadam) in the relationship between God and individual as God’s “approach with blessing, kindness, [or] punishment” to the individual. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), s.v. “**mqd**” (qadam).

<sup>54</sup> Here I provide the Scripture verse and below it Wesley’s *OT Note* that pertains to the discussion of preventive grace.

<sup>55</sup> Wesley lifted these comments directly out of Poole's *Annotations*. See Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, vol. 2 (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 33 and 93.

Following Matthew Poole's comments, Wesley saw these two Psalms as indicating that God comes before (prevents) humanity with his gifts of blessing and help. Although Wesley did not find the verb "prevent" in the following Old Testament Scriptures, he mentioned the broad sense of the prevenience of grace in his *OT Notes* on

Numbers 21:16 – And from thence *they went* to Beer: that *is* the well whereof the LORD spake unto Moses, Gather the people together, and I will give them water.

Wesley's Note: [...] *I will give them water* - In a miraculous manner. Before they prayed, God granted, and prevented them with the blessings of goodness. And as the brasen serpent was the figure of Christ, so is this well a figure of the spirit, who is poured forth for our comfort, and from him flow rivers of living waters.<sup>56</sup>

Joshua 22:31 – And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the children of Manasseh, This day we perceive that the LORD *is* among us, because ye have not committed this trespass against the LORD: now ye have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the LORD.

Wesley's Note: *Is among us* - By his gracious presence, and preventing goodness, in keeping you from so great an offence, and all of us from those calamities that would have followed it.<sup>57</sup>

2 Kings 3:11 – But Jehoshaphat said, *Is there* not here a prophet of the LORD, that we may enquire of the LORD by him? And one of the king of Israel's servants answered and said, Here *is* Elisha the son of Shaphat, which poured water on the hands of Elijah.

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Matthew Henry also noticed this mention of "prevent" in Psalm 59:10 and 21:3. It is interesting to note that Henry combines his comments on Psalm 59:10 with Psalm 21:3 (As Augustine did before him) - "*The God of my mercy shall prevent me with the blessings of his goodness and the gifts of his mercy, prevent my fears, prevent my prayers, and be better to me than my own expectations.*" See Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. III (McClellan, VA: MacDonald Publishing Company, n.d.), 457. Henry uses the exact phrase "preventing grace" six times in his *Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (commenting on Psalm 51:14-19, 56:8-13, John 4:4-26, Romans 9:14-24, 9:30-33, 10:12-21), but he uses the term in a Calvinistic sense as the grace that all humanity receives (sometimes termed "common grace") but does not extend to saving grace which is reserved for only the elect. For more on the Calvinistic sense of prevenient grace see Neil R. Livingston, "A Calvinistic Concept of Prevenient Grace" (ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1961).

<sup>56</sup> Wesley lifted this statement out of Henry's *Exposition* but changed Henry's word "anticipated" to "prevented." See Henry, *Commentary*, vol. I, 667.

<sup>57</sup> Wesley lifted this statement out of Poole's *Annotations*. See Poole, *A Commentary*, vol.1, 452.

Wesley's Note: [...] *Poured water* - Who was his servant; this being one office of a servant: and this office was the more necessary among the Israelites, because of the frequent washings which their law required. Probably it was by a special direction from God, that Elisha followed them, unasked, unobserved. Thus does God prevent us with the blessings of his goodness; and provide for those who provide not for themselves.<sup>58</sup>

Wesley, as can be seen from all of these *OT Notes*, found the concept of prevenience in the broad sense – God “preventing” humanity with the blessings of his goodness, in the Old Testament.<sup>59</sup>

Although Wesley found the broad concept of the prevenience of grace in the Old Testament, “he was primarily a man of the New Testament”<sup>60</sup> and it is in the *NT Notes* where Wesley's concept of prevenient grace is more fully developed, although more so implicitly than explicitly. In the *NT Notes*, Wesley makes only two explicit references to “preventing grace”:-Matthew 13:20 and Romans 2:14, but there are numerous implicit references to prevenient grace.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, it is more helpful to the study of the doctrine of prevenient grace to conceive of Wesley's articulation of prevenient grace and its connection to the

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<sup>58</sup> Wesley lifted this statement out of Henry's *Exposition* but again changed Henry's word “anticipate” to “prevent.” See Henry, *Commentary*, vol. II, 721.

<sup>59</sup> As will be indicated later in this chapter, the streams of influence regarding the broad conception of the prevenience of all grace appear to flow in this case from Psalms 21 and 59 to St. Augustine to Article X “Of Free Will,” of the Church of England's Articles of Religion to (perhaps Matthew Henry and Matthew Poole to) John Wesley.

<sup>60</sup> John Oswalt, after analyzing Wesley's Old Testament use, indicates that Wesley had enormous familiarity and respect for the Old Testament – especially the Moral Law of God. However, Oswalt states that “despite his [Wesley's] obvious familiarity with the Old Testament, he was primarily a man of the New Testament.” See John Oswalt, “Wesley's Use of the Old Testament in His Doctrinal Teachings,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 12 (Spring 1977): 45. Although it is clear that Wesley found the doctrine of prevenient grace in the Old Testament, the primary biblical source for his theological development of the doctrine was the New Testament. For corroboration of Oswalt's statement that Wesley was primarily a man of the New Testament, see Matthew Schlimm, “Defending the Old Testament's Worth: John Wesley's Reaction to the Rebirth of Marcionism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 42, No.2 (2007): 28-51.

<sup>61</sup> I will indicate the significance of these explicit statements in section 3.3 of this thesis. Wesley also found the Greek verb, φθάνω (phthano), translated in the Authorized Version as “prevent” in the sense of “to come or go before” in Matthew 17:25 and I Thes. 4:15 but did not exegete these Scriptures as teaching prevenient grace in the broad or narrow sense.

Bible as “a theological category developed to capture a central biblical motif.”<sup>62</sup>

Throughout the *NT Notes*, Wesley makes a multitude of implicit references to prevenient grace and the benefits which branch off from it. Probably the most significant implicit reference to prevenient grace in the *NT Notes* comes in John 1:9: “*This* was the true Light, who lighteth every man that cometh into the world,”<sup>63</sup> as this was to become the key verse for Wesley’s articulation of prevenient grace. Although Wesley does not mention prevenient grace in his comments on this verse, he gives a benefit of prevenient grace: that the “true Light” enlightens the conscience to provide a moral guide to humanity. He connects the “true Light” to prevenient grace in other writings.<sup>64</sup>

Another place where Wesley saw a biblical reference to prevenient grace is John 6:44. Wesley comments,

*No man comes to me, unless my Father draws him* – No man can believe in Christ unless God give him power. He draws us first by good desires, not by compulsion, not by laying the will under any necessity; but by the strong and sweet, yet still resistible, motions of his heavenly grace.

One can see from this comment that Wesley does not hold a Pelagian idea of humanity having any inherent power to come to God. Yet there is also no deterministic idea that human beings are irresistibly compelled by grace to come

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<sup>62</sup> H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 338. I am indebted to Greg Crofford for bringing this helpful quote to my attention. See Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 267.

<sup>63</sup> Wesley changed the AV’s “That” to “This” and “which” to “who” in his translation of John 1:9.

<sup>64</sup> See chapter 3 of this thesis. John Bengel’s (Bengelius) comment on John 1:9 is interesting with regard to prevenient grace as he indicated that the Johanine concept of enlightening included “Every one, and wholly, so far as a man does not withdraw himself; if any man is enlightened, he is enlightened by this light.... Not even one is excluded.” See John Albert Bengel, *The Critical English Testament*, eds. W. L. Blackley and James Hawes, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1, (London: Richard D. Dickinson, 1885), 527. Wesley indicated in the preface to his *NT Notes* that Bengel’s *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* was so illuminating that he considered simply translating it rather than writing his own *NT Notes*. See *NT Notes*, 7.

to God. The implicit reference by Wesley is to God preveniently drawing people by the “strong and sweet motions of his heavenly grace.”

Another example of an implicit reference to prevenient grace in Wesley’s *NT Notes* comes in Acts 10. This is the story of Peter’s visit to Cornelius, and in Wesley’s notes on the chapter he makes implicit reference to the operation of God’s prevenient grace in Cornelius’s life. Wesley comments on verse 35:

*But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness – He that first reverences God, as great, wise, good; the Cause, End, and Governor of all things; and secondly, from this awful regard to Him, not only avoids all known evil, but endeavours, according to the best light he has, to do all things well. Is accepted of him – Through Christ, though he knows Him not.*

Wesley indicates that the pre-Christian Cornelius was living in the “best light” that he had and was therefore accepted by God. However, he was accepted by God not because of Cornelius’ inherent righteousness but rather “through Christ” even though he “knows Him not.”<sup>65</sup> Wesley thus found in Acts 10 another biblical passage which dealt with God’s gracious prevenient activity among humanity.

In summary, although there are only two explicit references to prevenient grace in this, Wesley’s most thorough work on the New Testament, there are a multitude of implicit references to prevenient grace and its benefits throughout his *NT Notes*. If one holds to original authorship as Wesley did,<sup>66</sup> this would mean that Wesley found the doctrine of prevenient grace in the writings of Matthew

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<sup>65</sup> John Bengel comments on Acts 10:35 that Cornelius’ working of righteousness was “According to the measure derived from the light of nature, or rather, from revelation.” See Bengel, *The Critical English Testament*, 85.

<sup>66</sup> Wesley even held that St. Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, a position that very few New Testament scholars hold today, but common during Wesley’s time. See *NT Notes*, 808.

(*NT Notes* on Matthew 13:20), Luke (Acts 10),<sup>67</sup> John (John 1:9, 6:44), and Paul (Romans 2:14). With the exception of Mark, this comprises the majority of the New Testament authors. Although it is debatable whether the concept of God's prevenient grace is genuinely present and taught in the Scriptures,<sup>68</sup> there is no doubt that Wesley *believed* that the concept was in the Scriptures. It was the writings of the Patristic age however that made the implicit Scriptural doctrine of prevenient grace more explicit. It is to these Patristic writings that I now turn.

### 2.3 The Church Fathers: Augustine, Macarius & Ephraim Syrus

John Wesley was at Oxford University at the end of a rich period in Patristic learning. He considered the teachings of the Church Fathers to be a theological authority second only to Scripture.<sup>69</sup> In his *Address to the Clergy* (1756), Wesley wrote that the Fathers were “the most authentic commentators on Scripture, as being both nearest the fountain, and eminently endued with that

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<sup>67</sup> And Wesley likely considered that Peter approved the doctrine of the prevenient grace because of his speaking role in Acts 10.

<sup>68</sup> The most significant critique of Wesley's exegesis regarding his doctrine of prevenient grace is Thomas Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?” in *Still Sovereign? Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, eds. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 229-246. Schreiner argues that the Scriptures do not teach Wesley's interpretation of John 1:9, that God restores a measure of free-will to all people which gives them the ability to “choose salvation.” Schreiner thinks that the meaning of the text is more likely to be that “the coming of the light exposes and reveals where people are in their relationship to God.” See Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace,” 240. Schreiner fails to recognize the limited scope of prevenient grace in Wesley's theology here. The “true light” for Wesley does not provide the ability to “choose salvation” but simply awakens spiritually dead sinners to their reality before God and provides the opportunity for them to respond to further grace. Justification, implying in some sense “choosing salvation,” comes along later in Wesley's Way of Salvation. For further clarification of Wesley's view of prevenient grace in relation to justification, see section 3.5 of this thesis. Another critique of Wesley's exegesis regarding prevenient grace is in “Does the Bible Teach Prevenient Grace?” by William W. Combs in *The Sovereignty of God and the Spread of the Gospel* (Allen Park, Michigan: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002), 37-49. However, Combs's study is largely dependent on Schreiner's “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?”

<sup>69</sup> See comments by Albert Outler on Wesley's familiarity with Patristic writings in *Works* [BE], 1:74-76, and V.H.H. Green's comments in V.H.H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., 1961), 273-274.

Spirit by whom all Scripture was given.”<sup>70</sup> It is highly probable that such an important source for theological authority influenced Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace. E.J. Bicknell indicates that it was in the writings of the most influential of the Western Fathers, St. Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo, that the term “preventing grace” originated in its Latin form *praevenire*.<sup>71</sup> In Augustine’s *Treatise On the Spirit and the Letter*, written in 412 A.D., Augustine stated that

Since God, therefore, in such ways acts upon the reasonable soul in order that it may believe in him (and certainly there is no ability whatever in free will to believe, unless there be persuasion or summons towards some one in whom to believe), it surely follows that it is God who both works in man the willing to believe, and in all things prevents us with his mercy.<sup>72</sup>

In his *Treatise On Nature and Grace, Against Pelagius*, written in 414, Augustine mentioned “preventing grace” in a chapter heading:

CHAP. 35 [XXXI.] – WHY GOD DOES NOT IMMEDIATELY CURE PRIDE ITSELF. THE SECRET AND INSIDIOUS GROWTH OF PRIDE. PREVENTING AND SUBSEQUENT GRACE.<sup>73</sup>

In this chapter, although he used the term “anticipate” for “prevent,” Augustine indicated the difference between preventing (anticipating) and subsequent (following) grace: “Now the Scriptures refer to both of these operations of grace.

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<sup>70</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 10: 484.

<sup>71</sup> E.J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Glasgow: Robert MacLehose and Co., 1955), 190 as indicated in Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 24.

<sup>72</sup> Augustine, “A Treatise on the Spirit and the Letter” in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. Benjamin B. Warfield, vol. V of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 110.

<sup>73</sup> Augustine, “A Treatise on Nature and Grace Against Pelagius” in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. Benjamin B. Warfield, vol. V of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 133.

There is both this: “The God of my mercy shall anticipate me,” [Psalm 59:10] and again this: “Thy mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” [Psalm 23:6]”<sup>74</sup>

And in his *Treatise Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, written in 420,

Augustine mentioned God’s preventing mercy:

May God by all means turn away this folly of making ourselves first in His gifts, Himself last – because “His mercy shall prevent [praeveniet] me.” [Psalm 59:10] And it is He to whom is faithfully and truthfully sung, “For Thou hast prevented him with the blessings of sweetness.” [Psalm 21:3]”<sup>75</sup>

Greg Crofford, following Bicknell, indicates that these statements of Augustine’s based on the Psalms was the theological foundation for Article X, “Of Free Will,” of the 39 Articles of the Church of England in which Wesley found the statement “the grace of God by Christ preventing us.”<sup>76</sup>

Although there is no evidence that Wesley ever read the above statements by Augustine, it is clear that Wesley was very familiar with some of Augustine’s writings.<sup>77</sup> Wesley frequently refers to Augustine in his writings, showing that “he recognized Augustine as an eminent authority who must be reckoned with, as John English observes.”<sup>78</sup> At times Wesley employed Augustine as a theological authority and at other times he attacked Augustine’s theology when his own theological beliefs differed from Augustine’s. This is due to the fact that

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>75</sup> Augustine, “A Treatise Against Two Letters of the Pelagians” in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. Benjamin B. Warfield, vol. V of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 401.

<sup>76</sup> Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 23. See also Bicknell, “*Thirty-Nine Articles*,” 190.

<sup>77</sup> For a complete list of Wesley’s references to Augustine, see John C. English, “References to St. Augustine in the Works of John Wesley.” *Asbury Theological Journal* 60, no. 2 (2005): 20-24. Interesting in regard to Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace is his translation of Augustine’s *Confessions* where Augustine describes “the unchangeable light of the Lord [shining] above the very eye of my soul, and above my mind.” See *Works* [BE], 26:178-179. “Letter to Mr. John Smith” (1745).

<sup>78</sup> English, “St. Augustine,” 15.

Augustine's views on grace and human freedom were not consistent throughout his writings but rather changed over time.<sup>79</sup> Wesley was influenced by the early Augustine's idea of God's prevenient action and human responsibility but rejected the later Augustine's doctrine of predestination. Wesley's positive references to the early Augustine with regard to the prevenient activity of God and the essential human response to God can be seen from his quotation of Augustine's statement that "He who created us without ourselves will not save us without ourselves."<sup>80</sup> The early Augustine's idea of God's prevenient initiative in divine-human interaction likely had an influence on Wesley's view of salvation as Wesley quoted this statement frequently in his debates with the Calvinists.<sup>81</sup>

Wesley's negative assessment of the later Augustine's view of God's grace can be seen in his reference to Augustine in Wesley's treatise, *A Dialogue between a Predestinarian and His Friend* (1741). Wesley employs the style of a two-person dialogue, with Wesley taking the role of the "Friend." Wesley used Augustine's changing position on predestination to undermine Augustine's authority in theological argument on the particular issue of divine grace:

Pred[estinarian]. – Nay, our doctrine [of predestination] was maintained by St. Augustine.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 10. It appears that Augustine's theological position on God's grace and human response began to change in 417 A.D. due to his debates with Pelagius. See Augustine, "On Nature and Grace" in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge, vol. 86 of *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Thomas P. Halton (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>80</sup> Wesley quotes this statement from Augustine's sermon 169 (416 A.D.) on Phil. 3:3-16 in *Works [BE]*, 2:490. *The General Spread of the Gospel*, (1783) and in *Works [BE]*, 3:208. *On Working Out Our Own Salvation* (1785).

<sup>81</sup> Ted A. Campbell, "Christian Tradition, John Wesley, and Evangelicalism," *Anglican Theological Review* 74 (Winter 1992): 63. It is also possible that the writings of the early Augustine simply confirmed what Wesley already believed.

Friend. – Augustine speaks sometimes for it, and sometimes against it. But all antiquity for the first four centuries is against you, as is the whole Eastern Church to this day.<sup>82</sup>

Wesley used Augustine’s theological variance to his advantage in arguments with theological opponents so as to weaken Augustine’s authority, giving Wesley the upper hand in debate when the formidable theological authority of Augustine was against him.<sup>83</sup>

But Augustine was not the only Patristic source which influenced Wesley. In the above quote, Wesley notes another Patristic influence with which he was familiar and with which he could more thoroughly agree in regard to divine-human interaction – the “Eastern Church.”<sup>84</sup> Ted Campbell noted Wesley’s stress on the importance of the Fathers and particularly the Eastern Fathers in Wesley’s sermon, *On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel* (1777). In this sermon, Wesley wrote:

This is the religion of the primitive Church, of the whole Church in the purest ages. It is clearly expressed, even in the small remains of Clemens Romanus, Ignatius, and Polycarp; it is seen more at large in the writings of Tertullian, Origen, Clemens Alexandrinus, and Cyprian; and, even in the fourth century, it was found in the works of Chrysostom, Basil, Ephrem Syrus, and Macarius.<sup>85</sup>

Campbell noted that all of the writers Wesley respected in the fourth century were Eastern not Western Fathers, likely due to the fact that Wesley saw the West as compromised by Constantine’s influence over the church. Campbell writes that “the pockets of pure Christianity he [Wesley] recognized in the fourth century

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<sup>82</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 10:265.

<sup>83</sup> English, “St. Augustine,” 9.

<sup>84</sup> Albert Outler mentions the concept of prevenient grace also in the writings of the Western Father Jerome (*Epistles* 31, 33, 34, 62) but although Wesley had read Jerome, there is no indication that Wesley read these particular works. See *Works* [BE], 2:156-157, fn. 3.

<sup>85</sup> *Works* [BE], 3:586.

were exclusively those circles of Eastern Christian monks” who lived before Augustine.<sup>86</sup> That Wesley abridged the fifty “Spiritual Homilies” of Macarius the Egyptian (ca 300-391) for his *Christian Library* demonstrates that of the fourth century Fathers, Marcarius stands out as particularly influential on Wesley. Charles Rogers indicates that “Wesley encountered the concept of prevenient grace directly in the writings of an early Church Father – Macarius the Egyptian.”<sup>87</sup> Although Macarius never used the term “preventing grace” (i.e., its Greek equivalent), the concept of human striving to “work out your own salvation” (Phil 2:12), the phrase which Wesley later uses to express the human response to prevenient grace, can be seen in places like Wesley’s abridgment of Macarius’ Homily 3.<sup>88</sup>

WHAT shall GOD do with him that gives himself up to the world, and is deceived by the pleasures of it, or drawn away with the hurry of earthly distractions? The man upon whom he bestows the succors of his grace, is he who divorces himself from gross pleasures, and at all times forcibly urges his mind towards the Lord, both denying himself, and seeking after the Lord only. This is the person whom GOD takes into his special care, that keeps himself disentangled from the snares of this world; that "works out his salvation with fear and trembling;" that with the utmost heed passes through all the toils of the world, both seeking after the Lord for his assistance, and hoping in his mercy to be saved through grace.<sup>89</sup>

That this salvation, although strenuously worked out by human beings, is preveniently offered by God through grace, can be seen in Macarius’ statement

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<sup>86</sup> Ted A. Campbell, "John Wesley and the Asian Roots of Christianity," *Asia Journal of Theology* 8 (October 1994): 286.

<sup>87</sup> Rogers, “The Concept of Prevenient Grace,” 29, fn. 1. Macarius is the only Church Father that Rogers mentions as a source for Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace. The only Church Father that Greg Crofford mentions is Augustine for coining the term “prevenient grace.”

<sup>88</sup> Homily 4 in the Macarian literature. To see Wesley abridgements see Pseudo-Macarius, *Pseudo-Macarius: the Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, trans. George A. Maloney (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 52.

<sup>89</sup> *Christian Library*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/vol1/CL1Part2.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/vol1/CL1Part2.htm) (accessed on December 1, 2008).

above that “this is the person whom God takes into his special care” and in Wesley’s abridgement of Macarius’ Homily 4:<sup>90</sup>

The Lord has given them [Christians] truly to believe on him, and to be worthy of those spiritual good things. For the glory, and the beauty, and the heavenly riches of Christians are inexpressible, and purchased only with labor, and pains, and trials, and many conflicts. But the whole is owing to the grace of God.<sup>91</sup>

Macarius’ statement that “the whole is owing to the grace of God” indicates the accuracy of Maddox’s comment that there are “shared synergistic implications of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace and Macarius’ general soteriology.”<sup>92</sup>

Macarius’ writings on God’s prevenient activity and scrupulous human striving in response to grace apparently influenced Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace.<sup>93</sup>

But there were other Eastern Fathers who influenced Wesley as well.

One of these Eastern Fathers whom Wesley read was Ephraim (Ephrem) Syrus (ca 306-373). John Wesley wrote in his journal entry for October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1736, that he had read one of Ephraim’s *Exhortations* and that Ephraim Syrus was “The most awakening writer, I think, of all the ancients.”<sup>94</sup> On March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1747 Wesley was again reading “The Exhortations of Ephraim Syrus” and wrote, “Surely never did any man, since David, give us such a picture of a broken and

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<sup>90</sup> Homily 5 in the Macarian literature. See Pseudo-Macarius, *Fifty Spiritual Homilies*, 65.

<sup>91</sup> *Christian Library*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/vol1/CL1Part2.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/vol1/CL1Part2.htm) (accessed on December 1, 2008)

<sup>92</sup> Randy Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences and Differences,” *The Asbury Theological Journal* 45, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 31.

<sup>93</sup> Wesley’s Homily 17 of Macarius in the *Christian Library* mentions that “Some are prevented with the favors and gifts of the Holy Spirit, immediately, as soon as they ask, without toil, and sweat, and fatigue; GOD affording them grace, not by chance, but by a wisdom that exceeds all expression.” This is Homily 29 in the Macarian literature which reads “To some the charisms and gifts of the Holy Spirit come in advance.” See Pseudo-Macarius, *Fifty Spiritual Homilies*, 187. But the grace discussed by Macarius here is not what Wesley would describe as prevenient grace because the grace Macarius mentions is only given to some whereas prevenient grace is given to all.

<sup>94</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 1:42.

contrite heart” as did Ephraim.<sup>95</sup> He thought so much of the Syrian that in his *Address to the Clergy* (1756), Wesley recommended reading the Fathers but “above all” of them, “the man of a broken heart, Ephraim Syrus.”<sup>96</sup>

Despite these general statements regarding the value Wesley found in reading Ephraim, it is not absolutely clear as to precisely what writings Wesley actually read. V.H.H. Green’s appendix of Wesley’s reading while at Oxford indicates that Wesley read “Ephrem Syrus on Repentance,” but no further details are listed.<sup>97</sup> It is possible that this could be Ephraim’s homily *On Admonition and Repentance*; if so, there appears to be consonance between Ephraim’s view of grace and Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace. Ephraim describes the necessity of human response to divine grace when he writes in *On Admonition and Repentance*: “Not of compulsion is the doctrine; of free-will is the word of life. Whoso is willing to hear the doctrine, let him cleanse the field of his will, that the good seed fall not among the thorns of vain enquirings.”<sup>98</sup> Later in the homily, Ephraim describes the thorough *graciousness* of divine grace when he writes, “Of Thee, O Lord, of Thy grace it is that in our nature we should become good. Of Thee is righteousness, that we from men should become righteousness. Of Thee is thy mercy and favour, that we from the dust should become Thy image.”<sup>99</sup> Ephraim’s doctrine of grace is consistent with Wesley’s view that grace is the divine gift of God and that it is not due to human merit. Yet and at the same time,

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<sup>95</sup> *Works* [BE], 20:162.

<sup>96</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 10:484.

<sup>97</sup> Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley*, 313.

<sup>98</sup> Ephraim Syrus, “On Admonition and Repentance” in *Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian*, trans. A. Edward Johnson, vol. XIII of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 330.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

this grace is the un-coerced gift of God and not “of compulsion.” Whether or not what V.H.H. Green recorded as Wesley having reading Ephraim “On Repentance” was in fact Ephraim’s homily, *On Admonition and Repentance*, there surely seems to be some consonance between the two men’s understanding of the unmerited, yet un-coerced, nature of grace.<sup>100</sup>

Thus, Wesley found in the early Augustine, Macarius, and possibly Ephraim Syrus, indications that prevenient grace was a concept situated in the writings of the Church Fathers. As the theology of the Fathers was debated, it was codified in more authoritative forms, specifically the ancient councils and canons of the early centuries which expressed greater theological consensus than any one Church Father would have. It is therefore significant to the study of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace that evidence that points to Wesley finding the concept of prevenient grace in these ancient church documents be analyzed as well.

#### **2.4 The Ancient Councils & Canons: the Council of Orange & the Vincentian 'Canon'**

In John Wesley's sermon *The General Spread of the Gospel* (1783), he states that “although God does work irresistibly *for the time*, yet I do not believe there is any human soul in which God works irresistibly *at all times*.”<sup>101</sup> Albert Outler commented on Wesley's statement that this theological thought was preceded by the Second Council of Orange: “Note the echoes here of the crucial

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<sup>100</sup> Richard Heitzenrater notes that Wesley likely read Ephraim Syrus’ *A Serious Exhortation to Repentance and Sorrow for Sin and a Strict and Mortified Life . . . Translated into English from the Greek and Latin Versions Compared*. This book was printed in London in 1731. See *Works* [BE], 20: 162, fn. 65. Randy Maddox indicates that Wesley also read Ephraim’s *Graece. E. codicibus manuscriptis*, a collection of Ephraim’s works which was printed at Oxford in 1709. E-mail exchange between Randy Maddox and Chris Payk, January 17, 2009.

<sup>101</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:490. Italics in original.

distinction, emphasized by the Second Council of Orange (529) between the irresistibility of the sovereign grace of the Father and the resistibility of the prevenient grace of the Holy Spirit. This is the linch-pin in Wesley's doctrine of grace.”<sup>102</sup> The Second Council of Orange was held to find an alternative to Augustine’s idea of predestination, which was considered by the council to be “new and of no value”;<sup>103</sup> the members argued that the idea “collides with the intuitions of the church (*ecclesiasticus sensus*), with antiquity and the opinion of the Fathers.”<sup>104</sup> The Second Council of Orange was also held to put an end to semi-Pelagian ideas of free-will.<sup>105</sup> Both the ideas of the semi-Pelagians as advanced by John Cassian and the deterministic ideas of Augustine regarding divine grace and human response were anathematized by the council and the following summary of the lead sentences of the confession produced at the council point to why, although there is no direct evidence that Wesley read this confession, Outler connected the council's emphases with Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace: “We ought to preach and believe, that the free will has been so inclined and weakened by the sin of the first man, that no one since would be able either to love God as he ought, or to believe on God, or to work what is good before God, unless the grace of the divine mercy had preceded him.”<sup>106</sup> The conceptual link between the council's confession and Wesley's doctrine of

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<sup>102</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:490, fn. 29. See Outler's other reference to Wesley's theological precedent in the Second Council of Orange in *Works* [BE], 2:157, fn. 3: “Thus 'preventing' (prevenient) grace is the theological principle that assigns an absolute priority to the indwelling Spirit and yet allows for actual and valid human involvement, since the actions of the Holy Spirit are 'resistible', as the decrees of the Father are not (cf. the canons of the Second Council of Orange, A.D. 529).”

<sup>103</sup> Rienhold Seeberg, *The History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 369.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

prevenient grace is clear. Wesley indicated that “all antiquity for the first four centuries is against” Augustine on this matter,<sup>107</sup> suggesting the possibility that Wesley thought of the council’s confession as an alternative theological explanation to how salvation begins as opposed to Augustine's predestinarian explanation.

There is strong evidence to suggest that Wesley read another ancient document, the Vincentian “Canon,” which would support his adherence to the broad Church tradition of prevenient grace. Wesley commented in his Journal on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1738 that after reading through some Scriptural exegesis by Lutherans and Calvinists that “it was not long before Providence brought me to those who showed me a sure rule for interpreting Scripture, viz., consensus veterum – 'quod ad omnibus, quod ubique, quod semper creditum'. At the same time they sufficiently insisted upon a due regard to the One Church at all times and in all places.”<sup>108</sup> Albert Outler indicated that Wesley was referring to “the ancient consensus: what has been believed by all, everywhere and always,” and that this statement which Wesley found valuable for interpreting Scripture was the Vincentian “Canon.”<sup>109</sup> This Latin phrase loosely quoted by Wesley was written by Vincent of Lerins in 435 A.D. In the midst of the theological controversies over orthodoxy in the fifth century, Vincent of Lerins wrote *A Commonitory* in order to explain how to interpret the Scriptures authoritatively in light of all the competing interpretations of the time:

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<sup>107</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 10:265.

<sup>108</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:324, fn. 47. Wesley goes on to indicate that he “bowed the knee” too far to antiquity but he does not revoke the Vincentian Canon's value for biblical interpretation.

<sup>109</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:550, fn. 2.

Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been delivered everywhere, always, and by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense “Catholic,” which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universality. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true, which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors.<sup>110</sup>

Whomever it was that Wesley read as recounted on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1738, he was ultimately reading the words of Vincent of Lerins. When Wesley's theological method of interpreting Scripture according to the ancient consensus – what has been believed by all, everywhere, and always – was applied to the doctrines of grace and human freedom, it would incline him to reject Augustine's “new” doctrine of predestination and to accept the more consensual opinion of the other Fathers’ (often implicit) notion of prevenient grace. This consensual opinion regarding divine prevenient grace and human response was summarized in the Second Council of Orange. However, there were sources much closer to home which more clearly influenced Wesley in regard to prevenient grace – his own beloved Church of England.

## **2.5 The Church of England: the 39 Articles, the *Book of Common Prayer*, & the English Theologians<sup>111</sup>**

Frank Baker indicated that near the end of Wesley's ministry, at the 1788 Methodist Conference when he was under pressure to separate the Methodist

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<sup>110</sup> Vincent of Lerins, “A Commonitory” in *The Commonitory of Vincent of Lerins*, trans. C. A. Heurtley, vol. XI of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 132.

<sup>111</sup> This is a broad usage of the term “English Theologians” as it includes Church of England, Puritan, and Quaker (Robert Barclay) theologians.

people from the Church of England, Wesley once again asserted his loyalty to the Articles of Religion of the Church of England. Baker states that even though Wesley was aware that the Methodists would separate from the Church of England after his death, Wesley was a Church of England man and would remain so all his life.<sup>112</sup> Wesley's efforts to prove that Methodist doctrine was in continuity with the Church of England's doctrine show that he also considered the Church of England to be a theological authority. Furthermore, the theological influence of the Church of England and of English theologians both in the Church of England and independent with regard to the doctrine of prevenient grace is much more clearly traceable in Wesley's theology than the theological influence of Church Fathers or the ancient councils and creeds.

Wesley seemed to have a clear conscience regarding the faithfulness of Methodist doctrine to the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. He often asserted that he did not teach any doctrines which were not contained in the Bible, Church of England Homilies, and the *Book of Common Prayer* (which contains the Articles of Religion).<sup>113</sup> One of the most significant sources for Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace was the Articles of Religion. Wesley provided an abridged version of the Articles when he crafted *The Sunday Service of the Methodists* for the American Methodists in 1784. He reduced the Articles from 39 to 24 (the American Methodists added one Article) retaining Article X<sup>114</sup> of the Church of England's Articles of Religion, "Of Free Will," in his version of the Articles:

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<sup>112</sup> Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 311.

<sup>113</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:87-88, fn. 78.

<sup>114</sup> In Wesley's Articles for the American Methodists, "Of Free Will" was Article VIII.

#### Article VIII – Of Free Will

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing [praeveniente] us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.<sup>115</sup>

Article X, “Of Free Will,” was included in the Church of England’s Articles of Religion as early as 1563 and so it is evident that the concept of prevenient grace was a part of the Church of England’s doctrine well before Wesley’s time.<sup>116</sup>

Another important source for Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace was the *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)* which contained the Articles. Wesley would have been very familiar with the *BCP* from his upbringing at Epworth under the tutelage of his parents and as an ordained priest in the Church of England. The 1662 *BCP* mentions “preventing grace” a total of eleven times: in the Easter-Day Collect; the Monday and Tuesday in Easter-Week Collects; the Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity Collect; the Collects to be said after the Offertory when there is no Communion; Psalm 21; the Collect for the Forms of Prayer to Be Used at Sea; in the last Collect for the Making of Deacons; after the last Collect in the Ordering of Priests; after the last Collect before the Benediction in the Form of Ordaining of Consecrating of an Archbishop or Bishop; and in the *BCP*’s Article X – Of Free Will (see Appendix I). Greg Crofford comments, “Churchgoers as observant of the *Liturgy* as were John and Charles Wesley would have by force of

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<sup>115</sup> Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards*, 135. Wesley only deleted “good” from “good works” in the Church of England’s Article X.

<sup>116</sup> For more on the English “freewill” tradition dating back to before the English Reformation (in contradistinction to the Reformed tradition) in the Church of England, see McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace*, 41-70. Both traditions are evident within the Church of England from its inception.

repetition unconsciously incorporated such language into their theological worldview.”<sup>117</sup>

Wesley thus found in the Articles of Religion and in the *BCP*, authoritative sources of doctrine for the Church of England, the concept of prevenient grace. It is easy to see therefore why Wesley held that his doctrine of prevenient grace was in continuity with the Church of England’s doctrinal tradition.<sup>118</sup>

Charles Rogers’s analysis of Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace revealed that Wesley was influenced by a cluster of English theologians. It is not my desire to replicate Rogers’ or Crofford’s research on Wesley and prevenient grace. Therefore, I will simply mention the sources that these two researchers found that influenced Wesley in regard to prevenient grace; in this way, I will show the vast theological sources Wesley drew from in the articulation of his doctrine of prevenient grace.

Rogers indicated that Wesley found the concept of prevenient grace (though rarely this exact term) in the writings of Robert Barnes, Thomas Rogers, Richard Hooker, William Beveridge, Gilbert Burnet, John Pearson, Wesley’s

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<sup>117</sup> Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 24. Italics in original.

<sup>118</sup> In the Church of England, all theological authoritative sources were considered interpretive of *the* theological authority – Scripture. The other authoritative sources for Church of England theology in Wesley’s time were the Edwardian and Elizabethan Homilies. There is no explicit mention of preventing grace in the Homilies but Albert Outler thinks that the Elizabethan Homilies had at least an implicit reference to preventing grace in Homily XVII for “Rogation Week,” III and in Homily XVI for “Whitsunday,” I. See *Works* [BE], II: 193, fn. 35. Greg Crofford thinks that Wesley’s lack of reference to the Homilies in regard to prevenient grace indicates that Wesley did not find the doctrine of prevenient grace in the Homilies. See Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 26. It is likely that the Homilies, like the *Book of Common Prayer*, were a conceptual source of influence on Wesley regarding prevenient grace as Wesley was very observant of the Homilies as well as the Liturgy. However, no references to the Homilies are made by Wesley regarding the doctrine.

maternal grandfather, Samuel Annesley, John Norris, and William Tilly.<sup>119</sup>

Although the precise term “preventing grace” seldom appears in these sources, Rogers concluded, “Prevenient grace was clearly a theological concept bequeathed to Wesley through his reading and familiarity with the theological tradition of English Protestant Christianity.”<sup>120</sup>

Greg Crofford, in his analysis of Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace 41 years after Rogers’ work, added to the list of English theological influences on Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace the works of Robert South, Edward Reynolds, Stephen Charnock, John Smith, John Preston, Isaac Ambrose, John Tillotson, Richard Sibbes, Robert Bolton, Richard Lucas, Jeremy Taylor, and Robert Barclay.<sup>121</sup> Like Rogers, Crofford concluded that the precise term “preventing grace” was used rarely by these theologians, but “words that denote some aspect of prevenient grace were repeatedly employed” by them.<sup>122</sup> Most significant in Crofford’s research is his connection of the Quaker Robert Barclay’s idea of “the light of Christ,” based on John 1:9, with John Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace.<sup>123</sup>

Considering the cumulative impact of the *BCP*, including Article X “Of Free Will,” and the free-grace English theological tradition with which Wesley

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<sup>119</sup> Charles Rogers completed his PhD in 1967 under the direction of Frank Baker and had access to the “Frank Baker Collection of Wesleyana and British Methodism” at Duke Divinity School which allowed him access to these English theological writings, some of which are obscure. See Rogers, “The Concept of Prevenient Grace,” xi.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>121</sup> Greg Crofford completed his PhD in 2008 under the direction of Herbert McGonigle at the Nazarene Theological College in conjunction with the University of Manchester. At the University of Manchester, Crofford had access to the “Methodist Special Collections of the John Rylands Library” which allowed him access to these English theological writings, some of which are obscure. See Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 10.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-86.

was very familiar, it is clear that Wesley drew from the vast theological resources in his own English tradition as he developed his doctrine of prevenient grace.<sup>124</sup>

## 2.6 Conclusion

Near the end of John Wesley's life he wrote a small treatise entitled *Father Thoughts on Separation from the Church* (1789) in which he described the sources which were the most influential on his theological development:

From a child, I was taught to love and reverence the Scripture, the oracles of God; and next to these, to esteem the primitive Fathers, the writers of the first three centuries. Next, after the primitive church, I esteem our own, the Church of England, as the most scriptural national church in the world. I therefore not only assented to all the doctrines, but observed all the rubric in the Liturgy; and that with all possible exactness, even at the peril of my own life.<sup>125</sup>

From this study of the sources of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace, it is evident that the Scriptures – primarily the New Testament; the Church Fathers – primarily the Eastern Fathers; the Fathers' theological formulation in the ancient creeds and canons; and the free-grace tradition within the Church of England all contributed to provide foundational theological substance for John Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace.

Wesley was not a theological maverick constructing new doctrine; rather, he took what he considered to be mainstream orthodox Christian theology and

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<sup>124</sup> There are several other possible theological influences on Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. In 1745, Wesley abridged the Puritan Richard Baxter's *Aphorisms on Justification* (1649) in which Baxter does not mention "preventing grace" but does indicate a divine initiative (prevenience) and a resultant human response required in salvation. Wesley carefully edited out any distinctions Baxter made between God's decretive and elective will. Baxter later disavowed the *Aphorisms* as not clearly representing his theology. See *Works* [BE], 1:26-27 and Robert Monk, *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 103. John Milton also mentions "prevenient grace" (not "preventing grace") in Book XI of *Paradise Lost*, a book which Wesley quoted copiously in his sermons. See *Works* [BE], 4:612-613. It appears that prevenient grace is a concept with a rich history in English theology.

<sup>125</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 13: 272.

articulated it for the Methodist people of the eighteenth century. Although Wesley was influenced by the sources mentioned above, he made his own unique contribution to the doctrine of prevenient grace, and it is this Wesleyan contribution that I will now elucidate.

## Chapter Three

# Historical Development of Preventive Grace in the Writings of John Wesley

### 3.1 Introduction

The writings of John Wesley span nearly seven decades and number in the hundreds when one includes his edited material. Therefore, it is quite challenging to find what Wesley's comprehensive theology was on any particular topic. Luke Keefer Jr. comments,

Grasping essential elements in any aspect of John Wesley is a little like catching a greased pig. For a man of plain words, Wesley is elusive without intending to be so. He lived so long and wrote so much that one must have massive persistence to pursue him through successive decades and endless volumes.<sup>126</sup>

This "greasiness" is readily apparent when trying to discover what Wesley thought about preventive grace. Wesley scholars continue to debate exactly what Wesley thought preventive was and did. It is therefore essential to examine Wesley's actual usages of "preventing grace" in order to clarify what Wesley thought preventive grace is and does and in so doing, to discover the missiological implications that this doctrine provides for the church.<sup>127</sup> Below, I will analyze his explicit statements on preventive grace chronologically, since his theological concept of preventive grace developed over time. In order to bring some organization to the development of Wesley's doctrine of preventive grace, I will adopt the common delineations in Wesley studies of Wesley's theological

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<sup>126</sup> Luke L. Keefer, "Characteristics of Wesley's Arminianism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 88.

<sup>127</sup> For the sake of clarity (and brevity), I will limit my examination to Wesley's usages of the term "preventing grace" or derivations of the term in my theological analysis along with some of Wesley's references to the "true light who lighteth every man" (John 1:9), which Wesley indicates is the substance of preventive grace.

development: the Early, Middle, and Late Wesley, but I will organize these larger categories in light of the development of his doctrine of prevenient grace:

The Early Wesley (Oxford Methodism): 1725-1738

The Middle Wesley (Aldersgate & the Doctrinal Controversies): 1739-1765

The Later Wesley (Worsening Controversies with the Calvinists & *The Arminian Magazine*): 1765-1791

### 3.2 The Early Wesley (Oxford Methodism): 1725-1738

One finds the first mention of “preventing grace” in Wesley’s writings in 1732 from his Oxford Methodist days. Wesley abridged William Tilly’s sermon on Eph. 4:30 and re-titled it *On Grieving the Holy Spirit*. Thomas Jackson included it as an original Wesley sermon,<sup>128</sup> but Albert Outler corrected Jackson, indicating that Wesley simply preached this abridged version of Tilly’s sermon; Outler stated that Wesley added no original content to the sermon and changed none of Tilly’s basic ideas.<sup>129</sup> Wesley’s abridged version of Tilly’s sermon includes this statement on “preventing grace”:

I come now to consider by what kinds of sin the Holy Spirit is more especially grieved... The First I shall mention, as being more especially grievous to the Holy Spirit, is inconsiderateness and inadvertence to his holy motions within us. There is a particular frame and temper of soul, a sobriety of mind, without which the Spirit of God will not concur in the purifying of our hearts. It is in our power, through his *preventing* and assisting *grace*, to prepare this in ourselves; and he expects we should, this being the foundation of all his after-works.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 7: 485-492.

<sup>129</sup> *Works* [BE], 4: 531.

<sup>130</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 7: 489. Italics added. In Tilly’s 1708 sermon, *Of Grieving the Holy Spirit* (Sermon XI), the passage reads “The first thing I shall mention, as being more especially grievous to the Holy Spirit, is an habitual inconsideration and inadvertence of his holy motions within us. There is a certain peculiar frame and temper of soul requir’d, a sobriety of mind, without which the Spirit of God cannot, or will not concur to the purification of our corrupt nature: and which ‘tis in our own power, by virtue of his general preventing grace, to form and prepare within our selves; and he expects we should so, it being the ground and foundation, upon which he is to proceed with in his after-workings.” See William Tilly, *Sixteen Sermons, All (except One) Preach’d before the*

Wesley's version of Tilly's sermon indicates that the "preventing grace" of God is the source of power in human beings to prepare themselves for the "purifying of our hearts" by the Holy Spirit. The notion that God's grace comes preveniently before a human response is apparent even in this early sermon, but in his later sermons, Wesley moves away from Tilly's notion of human preparation for grace evident in this sermon, a development that is examined below.

Wesley makes an original contribution to his doctrine of prevenient grace in 1733 in a sermon Wesley preached at Oxford, *The Circumcision of the Heart*:

Our gospel, as it knows no other foundation of good works than faith, or of faith than Christ, so it clearly informs us we are not his disciples while we either deny him to be the author or his Spirit to be the inspirer and perfecter both of our faith and works. 'If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.' He alone can quicken those who are dead unto God, can breathe into them the breath of Christian life, and so *prevent*, accompany, and follow them with his *grace* as to bring their good desires to good effect. And 'as many as are thus led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.' This is God's short and plain account of true religion and virtue; and 'other foundation can no man lay.'<sup>131</sup>

Wesley indicates in this sermon that God's grace comes before any response by those who are "dead unto God" in order to "breathe" life into them. Here Wesley moved away from Tilly's notion that Wesley had adopted in *On Grieving the Holy Spirit*, the idea of human beings being able to respond to grace before they are "purified" by the Holy Spirit. Wesley's contribution to the doctrine of prevenient grace here was that he more forcefully indicates the unilateral work of God in *The Circumcision of the Heart*. However, it is unknown whether or not

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*University of Oxford, At St. Mary's, Upon Several Occasions* (London: Bernard Lintott Bookseller, 1712), 326.

<sup>131</sup> *Works* [BE], 1: 411. Italics added.

Wesley altered the content of this sermon after his Aldersgate experience in 1738 since the earliest known copy of this sermon dates from 1748.<sup>132</sup>

Another contribution to Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace comes in 1733 in Wesley's *Prayers for Children*,<sup>133</sup> which is a modified version of prayers found in the *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)*. Wesley instructs children on Tuesday evening to pray:

*Prevent* me, O Lord, in all my doings for the time to come, and further me with thy continual help, that, in all my thoughts, words, and works, I may continually glorify thy holy name. Grant me thy grace, that I may follow thy blessed saints in all righteousness and holy living, that I may at last come to be a partaker with them of glory everlasting.<sup>134</sup>

And on Wednesday morning Wesley instructs children to pray: "Let thy *grace* always *prevent* and follow me, that I may be continually given to all good works, and may always glorify my Father which is in Heaven."<sup>135</sup> In these prayers, Wesley, drawing from the liturgy of the *BCP*, highlights the ubiquitous presence of God's grace coming before humanity all along the Way of Salvation. In his Oxford Methodist days, it appears from Wesley's writings that he held to the Church of England concept of the prevenience of all grace, an idea present in the *BCP* and more clearly articulated in the sermons of William Tilly. It is not until after Aldersgate, and especially in the debates with the Calvinist's and the Church

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<sup>132</sup> *Works* [BE], 4:452. Albert Outler indicates that the 1748 version of *The Circumcision of the Heart* was an "updated version" of the 1733 version of which there are no known copies. It is very likely that Wesley updated this sermon in 1748 in order to fit with his revised, post-Aldersgate theology. See *Works* [BE], 1:398.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Jackson dates Wesley's *A Collection of Forms of Prayer* which includes *Prayers for Children* as being first printed in 1733. See *Works* [Jackson], 11:203.

<sup>134</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 11:264. Italics added. For numerous antecedents in the *BCP*, see Appendix I of this thesis.

<sup>135</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 11:265. Italics added. The Collect for the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity (*BCP*): Lord, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*. See Appendix I of this thesis.

of England clergymen who were suspicious of his doctrine, that Wesley developed his more nuanced doctrine of prevenient grace.

### **3.3 The Middle Wesley (Aldersgate & the Doctrinal Controversies): 1739-1765**

The Aldersgate experience in John Wesley's life had the effect of situating prevenient grace more definitively in Wesley's Way of Salvation. Although precisely what happened at Aldersgate Street on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1738 is debated, all Wesley scholars agree that something significant took place there in Wesley's life.<sup>136</sup>

After Aldersgate, justification by faith assumed a more central role in Wesley's theology as one of the twin foci along with sanctification. Wesley attributed all of the resources in human justification to the grace of God while simultaneously holding that all humanity was given the opportunity to respond to God in faith. Wesley held to a doctrine of total depravity that was just as bleak as that of the Protestant Reformers for those who were in the natural state, yet he also indicated that no one was left by God in the natural state, for no one was without "preventing grace."<sup>137</sup>

It was in this period following Aldersgate that Wesley began to part paths with George Whitefield over Whitefield's Reformed doctrine of predestination. In 1739, Wesley felt constrained to publish his sermon, *Free Grace*, which was

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<sup>136</sup> Some scholars argue that what happened at Aldersgate was Wesley's conversion (justification). Other scholars argue that Wesley received the assurance of his salvation at Aldersgate. For discussion on the topic see Randy Maddox, ed. *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990).

<sup>137</sup> Wesley indicated this in a letter to John Mason in 1776. *Works* [Jackson], 12:453. See discussion on this letter below.

his complete rejection of the Reformed doctrine of predestination.<sup>138</sup> Although Wesley does not explicitly mention “preventing grace” in this sermon, he describes “the grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all, and free for all.”<sup>139</sup> It was in the 1740s, following these disputes with Whitefield and other Calvinists, that Wesley began to explicitly develop his doctrine of prevenient grace as a middle-of-the-road soteriological alternative to the Reformed doctrine of predestination on the one hand<sup>140</sup> and semi-Pelagian soteriology among some Church of England clergy on the other. The theological category “preventing grace” allowed Wesley to hold together in tension the ideas that humanity is completely dependent on God for salvation and yet at the same time, that all of humanity is included in the free offer of salvation.

In 1741 Wesley mentioned “preventing grace” and indicated the Trinitarian dimension of prevenient grace for the first time in the preface to his *Extract on the Life and Death of Mr. Haliburton*:<sup>141</sup>

The general manner wherein it pleases God to set it [the Kingdom of God] up in the heart is this: A sinner, being drawn by the love of the Father, enlightened by the Son, (“the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world,”) and convinced of sin by the Holy Ghost; through the *preventing grace* which is given him freely, cometh weary and heavy laden, and casteth all his sins upon Him that is “mighty to save.” He receiveth from Him true, living faith. Being justified by faith, he hath peace with God: He rejoices in hope of the glory of God, and knows that sin hath no more dominion over him. And the love of God is shed abroad in his heart, producing all holiness of heart and of conversation.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> *Works* [BE], 3:542-563.

<sup>139</sup> *Works* [BE], 3:544.

<sup>140</sup> For a detailed description of Wesley’s debates with Whitefield and other Calvinists over the doctrine of predestination, see Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1988).

<sup>141</sup> Wesley also mentioned “preventing grace” in his journal entry for June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1740 regarding the Lord’s Supper which I will expand upon when I discuss the sermon *The Means of Grace* below.

<sup>142</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 14:212. Italics added.

God's grace which is preveniently given to humanity combines the drawing love of the Father, the enlightening of the Son, and the conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit. Here Wesley also indicates for the first time his most oft-repeated biblical support for prevenient grace – the enlightening of the Son, based on John 1:9. Another significant fact is that in his explanation of the Way of Salvation, Wesley asserts that “preventing grace” comes before justification but that it is inextricably connected to justification and sanctification (“holiness of heart and conversation”).

While Wesley and Whitefield agreed in 1741 that they would suppress their theological differences with regard to predestination,<sup>143</sup> Wesley continued to express in his writings the way in which human beings, spiritually dead in sin, are able to respond to God by prevenient grace. In 1742 Wesley published the pamphlet *The Principles of a Methodist*, his response to Josiah Tucker, an Anglican clergyman who asserted in his pamphlet *A Brief History of the Principles of Methodism* that Wesley was theologically inconsistent. In *The Principles of a Methodist*, Wesley set forth his teaching on Christian salvation.<sup>144</sup> Wesley, ironically quoting Tucker as providing a reliable account of Methodist views on the spiritual state before justification, writes:

Our spiritual state should be considered distinctly under each of these views.

1) Before *justification*; in which state we may be said to be unable to do anything acceptable to God, because then we can *do nothing but come to Christ*. Which ought not to be considered as *doing* anything, but as *supplicating* (or waiting) to receive a *power of doing* for the time to come.

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<sup>143</sup> Rex Matthews, *Timetables of History for Students of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 19.

<sup>144</sup> *Works* [BE], 9:47-48.

For the preventing grace of God, which is common to all, is sufficient to *bring* us to Christ, though it is not sufficient to carry us any *further* till we are justified.<sup>145</sup>

Prevenient grace, if not responded to by faith resulting in justification, does not carry a person farther in the Way of Salvation. For Wesley, justification is a crucial event and milestone in the Way of Salvation. Faith is the appropriate response to grace and allows for the divine outpourings of grace to continue. If faith is not expressed, the divine outpourings of grace dry up. It is not clear in this passage whether Wesley understood prevenient grace to end, or simply to lie dormant, if not responded to by faith resulting in justification. Here, Wesley's contribution to the doctrine of prevenient grace is that in the state before justification, the human being is completely dependent upon God for all spiritual resources to come to faith. Another important aspect of Wesley's concept of prevenient grace as revealed in *The Principles of a Methodist* is that it is universally given by God to all humankind.

Wesley's responses to additional critique brought further development in his doctrine of prevenient grace. In 1743 Wesley wrote *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* in which he defended Methodist doctrine and activities from strong critiques written by Church of England clergymen. In 1745 he expanded this defense with *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*. He was particularly criticized for his doctrines of justification by faith and holiness and so in *A Farther Appeal* he laid out his understanding of the Methodist Way of Salvation which he believed to be in continuity with biblical

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 64. Italics in original. Wesley provided the parenthetical addition "(or waiting)" to Tucker's text.

and Church of England precedents.<sup>146</sup> In citing Church of England doctrine for support of his own doctrine, Wesley quoted Articles IX-XIII of the Articles of Religion which included Article X “Of Free Will”:

Art. X. Of Free Will

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the *grace* of God by Christ *preventing* us that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will.<sup>147</sup>

Wesley, following the flow of logic from Article IX Of Original or Birth Sin; Article X Of Free Will; Article XI Of the Justification of Man; Article XII Of Good Works and Article XIII Of Works done before Justification, used these Articles to show that according to Church of England doctrine, sanctification was not previous to justification, but rather sanctification followed justification. God’s grace preveniently given was the source of power necessary for humanity to turn to God in faith in order to be justified which would then result in sanctification. Prevenient grace here is the source of good will which produces good works in humanity.

Further doctrinal controversies beyond the Church of England reveal how Wesley thought prevenient grace was transmitted to humanity. In 1746 Wesley again mentions “preventing grace” in his sermon *The Means of Grace*. Wesley states, “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions ordained by God, and appointed for this end – to be the *ordinary* channels

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<sup>146</sup> *Works* [BE], 11:5-23.

<sup>147</sup> *Works* [BE], 11:112. Italics added. Wesley more fully develops his idea of God’s grace coming before humanity in *A Farther Appeal* when he describes the operations of the Holy Spirit upon humanity as human beings are “enlightened by the knowledge of God,” but Wesley does not explicitly mention “preventing grace” here. See *Works* [BE], 11: 163-164.

whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”<sup>148</sup>

Albert Outler notes that Wesley was in conflict with the Moravians over the place of the ordinances in the Christian life.<sup>149</sup> What is important here with regard to Wesley’s view of prevenient grace is that he thought that grace is conveyed by *means*. The chief of these means, or the ways in which Wesley believed God’s grace comes to humanity, were prayer, searching the Scriptures, and receiving the Lord’s Supper.<sup>150</sup> Also significant is that Wesley believed prevenient grace flows in continuity with justifying and sanctifying grace. Although in his 1742 pamphlet *The Principles of a Methodist* Wesley indicates that prevenient grace does not move one past justification, in *The Means of Grace* Wesley indicates that all grace, whether it be prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying, are all one grace – the grace of God. To use Maddox’s distinction, prevenient grace in the narrow sense comes before justification and is succeeded by justifying grace, yet these are only epistemological distinctions Wesley made to provide identification marks along the Way of Salvation.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:381. Italics in original.

<sup>149</sup> Outler indicates that this conflict was rooted in divergence between the Moravians thinking the sacraments were superfluous while Wesley held to a view of the sacraments in keeping with his Church of England as essential ‘means of grace.’ The Methodist people were split in their opinion on this issue causing Wesley to write this sermon. See *Works* [BE], 1:376. Wesley was dealing with this conflict at least as early as June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1740 when he wrote in his journal that “I showed at large, I. That the Lord’s Supper was ordained by God, to be a means of conveying to men either preventing, or justifying, or sanctifying grace, according to their several necessities.” See *Works* [BE], 19:159.

<sup>150</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:381. For a thorough analysis of Wesley’s understanding of the “means of grace” see Dean Blevins, “Means of Grace: Towards a Wesleyan Praxis of Spiritual Formation.” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 69-84.

<sup>151</sup> In 1746, Wesley also wrote the sermon, *The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption*, in which, although he does not explicitly use the term prevenient grace, he describes the awakening experienced by the sinner to God due to prevenient grace. This is the most extended description of awakening in all of Wesley’s sermons and is similar in severity to Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

In the Methodist Conference Minutes for (June 16<sup>th</sup>) 1747, Wesley re-emphasized the place of prevenient grace in the Way of Salvation. In this conference John and Charles Wesley along with other Methodists were discussing some of the thorny theological questions with which Methodist preachers were wrestling. One of these questions dealt with the issue of how someone could lack justification by faith and yet could live a “blameless life.” Part of the answer to this question that was offered in the Minutes was that “Men may have many good tempers, and a blameless life (speaking in a loose sense,) by nature and habit, with *preventing grace*; and yet not have faith and the love of God.”<sup>152</sup> The Wesley brothers, through these Minutes, indicate that acts which are genuinely good (though not meritorious), and not merely “splendid sins,” can be performed by people who are not justified. It is important to note that the Wesleys attributed these good works to the operation of prevenient grace working in humanity.<sup>153</sup> In these Minutes there is also a reassertion of prevenient grace being the preparatory grace for justification by faith. Prevenient grace is at work in people’s lives prompting good fruit and yet these people do “not have faith and the love of God.” The purpose of prevenient grace here is to lead on to justifying grace and on along the Way of Salvation.

In 1748, Wesley further developed his doctrine of prevenient grace by pointing out the necessity of a human “re-action” to God’s prevenient grace: he

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<sup>152</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 8: 293. Italics added.

<sup>153</sup> When the Methodist preachers in 1745 considered the case of Cornelius (Acts 10), they indicated that the reason Cornelius was in the favor of God in some degree even in his pre-Christian state was due to the fact that his works were done with “the grace of Christ.” See *Works* [Jackson], 8: 283. The Wesleys and the early Methodists attributed all good works before justification to prevenient grace.

drew on the language of the *Book of Common Prayer* to express this idea in his sermon *The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God*:

For it plainly appears God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts upon God. He *prevents* us indeed with the blessings of his goodness. He first loves us, and manifests himself unto us. While we are yet afar off he calls us to himself, and shines upon our hearts. But if we do not then love him who first loved us; if we will not hearken to his voice; if we turn our eye away from him, and will not attend to the light which he pours upon us: his Spirit will not always strive; he will gradually withdraw, and leave us to the darkness of our own hearts. He will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again; unless our love, and prayer and thanksgiving return to him, a sacrifice wherewith he is well pleased.<sup>154</sup>

Wesley indicates in this sermon his anti-Reformed notion of the *resistibility* of grace.<sup>155</sup> God calls those who are “far off,” but if humans do not respond to these motions of the Spirit, the Spirit will “withdraw.” Following the *Book of Common Prayer* formulation, Wesley says prevenient grace is given as “the blessings of his goodness”<sup>156</sup> previous to human action toward God, but this grace must be responded to. Wesley uses the metaphor of breathing to capture God’s prevenient breathing into the human soul which is breathed back to God in the form of love, prayer, and thanksgiving.

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<sup>154</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:442. Italics added. Albert Outler indicated in 1984 that Wesley’s use of the term “re-action” in this sermon was a pioneer usage as indicated by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). See *Works* [BE], 1:436, fn. 26. This was corrected in the 1989 version of the *OED* to indicate that Digby was first recorded using the word “re-act” in 1644, Swift the second in 1724, and Wesley the third in 1748 (mistakenly 1771 in the *OED*). It appears that Wesley’s development of the doctrine of prevenient grace continued the development of the term *reaction* in the English language. See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “re-action.”

<sup>155</sup> Note that Wesley indicates that it is the Holy Spirit whom humanity may resist. Wesley writes in his 1783 sermon, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, that “although God does work irresistibly *for the time*, yet I do not believe that there is any human soul in which God works irresistibly *at all times*. Nay, I am fully persuaded there is not. I am persuaded there are no men living that have not many times ‘resisted the Holy Ghost’ [Acts 7:51], and ‘made void the counsels of God against themselves’ [Luke 7:30]. *Works* [BE], 2:490. Albert Outler notices here the echoes of the Second Council of Orange (529) which emphasized the “irresistibility of the sovereign grace of the Father and the resistibility of the prevenient grace of the Holy Spirit” which is the “linch-pin in Wesley’s doctrine of grace.” See *Works* [BE], 2:490, fn. 29. See also the *NT Notes* on John 6:44.

<sup>156</sup> See the *BCP* version of Psalm 21 in Appendix I of this thesis.

In yet another instance, Wesley indicates a benefit of prevenient grace that is unique among his many references to it in his writings: he refers to this benefit in his 1748 *Sermon on the Mount III* in which he is contemplating the hatred of the world against the church:

Our Saviour's words are express: 'If ye were of the world, the world would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, therefore the world hateth you.' Yea (setting aside what exceptions may be made by the *preventing grace* or the peculiar providence of God) it hateth them as cordially and sincerely as ever it did their Master.<sup>157</sup>

Albert Outler notes that in this case, Wesley uses "preventing grace" to mean not "to come before" but rather, "to hinder."<sup>158</sup> Wesley indicates here that "preventing grace" (and providence) restrains the world's wickedness against the church. Regrettably, Wesley does not elaborate on the scope of this restraint of wickedness in any of the other statements he makes on "preventing grace," making it a unique statement in his doctrine of prevenient grace.

Examining Wesley's *A Christian Library (CL)* offers additional insight into his development of the doctrine of prevenient grace. Between 1749 and 1755 Wesley published *A Christian Library*, a 50-volume work of edited theological material from various authors which was designed to help the Methodists live a life of practical holiness. Wesley freely edited out of the *CL* any theological "mistake" and added whatever he thought was "needful" in the writings to bring the material into conformity with Methodist doctrine. Wesley concluded that "I therefore take no author for better, for worse (as indeed I dare not call any man Rabbi), but endeavour to follow each so far as he follows Christ, and not

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<sup>157</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:526. Italics added.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, fn. 125.

knowingly one step further.”<sup>159</sup> Because Wesley was the editor of the *CL*, it is reasonable to conclude that the *CL* expresses Wesley’s theological thoughts on the subject matter he engaged through it, including the doctrine of prevenient grace.<sup>160</sup>

A significant reference to prevenient grace is found in Wesley’s extract of John Arndt’s *True Christianity*:

For such a resolution of doing well is the first work of the Holy Spirit, and that *preventing grace* that allureth, inviteth, and moveth all men. Happy, therefore, is the man, who with his heart is attentive and obedient to him, and hearkeneth to the voice of the wisdom of GOD, "uttering her voice in the streets;" who duly considereth, that all things he vieweth with his eyes, are so many memorials of their Creator, by which he endeavoreth to draw mankind to the love of himself.<sup>161</sup>

Wesley indicates through *True Christianity* that it is the work of the Holy Spirit and prevenient grace that both draws (“allureth”) people to God and puts good desires in their hearts (“moveth”).

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<sup>159</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 14:222-223 as quoted in Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 28-29. For his research on prevenient grace in the *CL*, Crofford used the earlier (1<sup>st</sup>) 50 volume edition (1749-1755) which is stored at the University of Manchester. I have consulted the later (2<sup>nd</sup>) 30 volume online version of the *CL* (1819) available through NNU’s website ([http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/index.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/index.htm)) which was made available online after Crofford completed his research. The later 30 volume edition of the *CL* was being prepared by Wesley but was never published until after his death and contains many more references to prevenient grace than the first edition did. This information was kindly provided to me in a forwarded e-mail exchange between Greg Crofford, Herbert McGonigle and Chris Payk, January 29, 2009.

<sup>160</sup> The 30 volume *CL* includes 42 references by 19 authors to “preventing grace” or derivatives of the term using the word “prevent” in the sense of God’s grace coming before human response. I will only expand on the most significant references to prevenient grace in the *CL* in the body of this thesis but I will reference all of them to illustrate how prevenient grace is thoroughly integrated into Wesley’s theological thought and the traditions from which he drew. See Appendix II.

<sup>161</sup> *Christian Library*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/vol1/CL1Part4.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/vol1/CL1Part4.htm) (accessed on February 1, 2009). Italics added. Wesley found the phrase “preventing grace” to be the one used by Anthony William Boehm in 1712 when he translated John Arndt’s original German *True Christianity* into English. See John Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. Anthony W. Boehm, (1712; repr., Boston: Lincoln & Edmans, 1809), 187. “Preventing grace” is also mentioned on pages 402 and 418.

Elsewhere in the *CL*, in Wesley's extract of Bishop Thomas Ken's *An Exposition of the Church Catechism*, Wesley makes an interesting reference to prevenient grace which resonates with his earlier theology:

Glory be to thee, who in my infancy didst initiate me by holy Baptism; and who, by thy *preventing grace*, when I was a little child, didst receive me into the evangelical covenant, didst take me up into the arms of thy mercy, and didst bless me. Glory be to thee, who didst early dedicate me to thyself, to prepossess me by thy love, before the world should seize and defile me.<sup>162</sup>

In this instance, prevenient grace acts upon a child to bring him/her "into the evangelical covenant." Wesley did not edit this out of his extract of Bishop Ken's *Exposition*, even though in his Standard Sermons Wesley laid a firm foundation of faith being the way into the evangelical covenant. The work of prevenient grace to bring children into the evangelical covenant through baptism is a notion not developed by John Wesley. It was Charles Wesley who "at times appears to espouse the baptismal regeneration of infants"<sup>163</sup> while John was largely silent on the issue.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> *Christian Library*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/vol13/CL13Part8.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/vol13/CL13Part8.htm) (accessed on February 1, 2009). Italics added. I have been unable to find an original version of Thomas Ken's *Exposition of the Church Catechism* to see if the phrase "preventing grace" is in the original or if it was added by Wesley. However, in Thomas Ken's *Exposition of the Apostle's Creed* he does mention divine prevenience: "Out of what motive did Thou suffer, O boundless benignity, but out of Thy own preventing love, free mercy, and pure compassion? And therefore I praise and love Thee. See Thomas Ken, *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* (London: William Pickering, 1852), 45.

<sup>163</sup> Crofford, "Streams of Mercy," 269.

<sup>164</sup> However, Randy Maddox indicates that Wesley distilled an early sermon by William Tilly based on Phil. 2:12-13 which connected prevenient grace with baptism which Wesley preached between 1732-1734 but later when he wrote *On Working Out Our Own Salvation* in 1785 (based on Phil. 2:12-13) he did not make the same connection of prevenient grace with baptism. In *On Working Out* Wesley correlated prevenient grace with conscience instead of baptism. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 228 and Tilly, *Sixteen Sermons*, 237-251.

In another piece from the *CL*, Wesley's extract of Hugh Binning's untitled sermon on I John 1:7,<sup>165</sup> suggests why John Wesley may have connected the Johanine idea of "light" with prevenient grace:

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of JESUS CHRIST his SON cleanseth us from all sin. In darkness there is nothing but confusion and disorder; and light only makes that disorder visible to the soul, to the affecting of the heart. Now, when once the soul has received that light, there is a desire kindled in the heart after more of it; as when the eye has once perceived the sweetness of the light, it opens itself to a fuller reception of more: So the soul that is once thus happily *prevented* by the first salutation and visit of "that day-spring from on high, while he was sitting in darkness, and in the shadow of death," afterwards follows after that light! And desires nothing more than to be embosomed with it: That tender *preventing mercy* so draws the heart after it, that it can never be at perfect rest, till the night be wholly spent, and all the shadows of it be removed, and the sun clearly up above the horizon; and that is the day of that clear vision of God's face.<sup>166</sup>

In this sermon by Binning, Wesley finds the connection between St. John's metaphor for "light" and the awakening that takes place in the sinner's life due to prevenient grace. It is "preventing mercy" manifested as light to a darkened soul which draws the soul to follow after God. It appears that Wesley noted the connection of the Johanine idea of "light" to prevenient grace in the writings of both the Quaker Robert Barclay<sup>167</sup> and the Scottish Presbyterian Hugh Binning.

Also for the *CL*, Wesley composed an extract of *How We May Be Universally and Exactly Conscientious*, a sermon on Acts 24:16 written by his maternal grandfather, Samuel Annesley. This work provided the theological

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<sup>165</sup> Wesley in the *CL* indicates that this was a sermon on I John 1:5 but in Binning's sermons it was a sermon on I John 1:7.

<sup>166</sup> *Christian Library*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/vol17/CL17Part1.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/vol17/CL17Part1.htm) (last accessed February 1, 2009). Italics added. Wesley found the phrase "preventing mercy" in Binning's sermon. See Hugh Binning, "Fellowship with God, or, Sermons on the First Epistle of St. John," in *The Works of Hugh Binning*, (Edinburgh: R. Fleming & Company, 1735), 424. See also page 440 for an interesting "actual application of these preventing mercies" by Binning where he describes the effects of God's prevenient grace upon the sinner.

<sup>167</sup> See Crofford, "Streams of Mercy," 67-86.

foundation for Wesley's later sermon *On Conscience* (1788) in which he added to his doctrine of prevenient grace the functioning of conscience:

The offices of conscience are likewise various. In general, the proper office of conscience is to apply that light which is in the mind to particular actions or cases. The light which is in the mind is either the light of nature, or rather *preventing grace*; or the light of divine revelation.<sup>168</sup>

Greg Crofford found when analyzing this statement in Samuel Annesley's original sermon that Wesley added "or rather preventing grace" in order to root the operation of conscience in God's prevenient grace and to avoid the operation of conscience to any cause apart from God.<sup>169</sup>

In the *CL*, Wesley also extracted Richard Lucas' *An Enquiry After Happiness* which includes a reference to "preventing grace" which may be the source of (or at least a confirmation of) Wesley's idea that prevenient grace restrains the wickedness of the world against the church, a notion which he articulated in his *Sermon on the Mount III* (1748). Wesley's extract of *An Enquiry* has a very similar idea:

The light of the Gospel, and the *preventing grace* of GOD, have undoubtedly given a great check to the progress of sin in the world: but since no man can be justified but through faith in the blood of JESUS, it is plain that we too must be concluded under sin.<sup>170</sup>

Wesley's comment in his *Sermon on the Mount III* that prevenient grace restrains the world's hatred of the church could have its source in Lucas' statement that "preventing grace" restrains the progress of sin in the world, though he may have

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<sup>168</sup> *Christian Library*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/vol21/CL21Part8.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/vol21/CL21Part8.htm) (accessed February 1, 2009). Italics added. This sermon of Annesley's is mistakenly attributed to Matthew Poole in the *CL*. See *Works* [BE], 3:481, fn. 4.

<sup>169</sup> Crofford, "Streams of Mercy," 47-48.

<sup>170</sup> *Christian Library*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/vol24/CL24Part8.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/vol24/CL24Part8.htm) (accessed February 1, 2009). Italics added. Wesley found the term "preventing grace" in Richard Lucas' *An Enquiry*. See Richard Lucas, *An Enquiry After Happiness*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, 1735), 434. "Preventing grace" is also mentioned on page 204.

come to this view earlier. This idea of prevenient grace restraining human wickedness is similar to the function of “common grace” in the Reformed tradition.<sup>171</sup>

Another work which may have influenced Wesley’s thoughts on prevenient grace restraining evil, and the most copious usage of prevenient grace found in the *CL*, comes in Wesley’s extract of Dr. Robert South’s sermon on I Samuel 25:32-33 entitled, *Prevention of Sin, an Invaluable Mercy*. Wesley’s version of the sermon includes multiple usages of the term “preventing grace” (or various derivations of the term), but they are used in the sermon both in the sense of “to come before” and in the sense “to hinder.” For example,

Now under this deplorable necessity of ruin and destruction does GOD’s *preventing grace* find every sinner, when it "snatches him like a brand out of the fire," and steps in between the purpose and the commission of his sin. It finds him going on resolutely in the high and broad way to perdition; which yet his perverted reason tells him is right, and his will pleasant: And therefore he has no power of himself to leave or turn out of it; but he is ruined jocundly and pleasantly, and damned according to his heart's desire. And can there be a more wretched spectacle of misery, than a man in such a condition? A man pleasing and destroying himself together; a man (as it were) doing violence to damnation, and taking hell by force? So that when the *preventing* goodness of GOD reaches out its arm, and pulls him out of this fatal path, it does by main force even wrest him from himself, and save him as it were against his will.<sup>172</sup>

The sense of “to hinder” is found in this passage:

In the Third and last place, we learn from hence the great reasonableness of not only a contented, but also a thankful acquiescence in any condition, and under the severest passages of Providence, which can possibly befall us; Since there is none of all these but may be the instrument of *preventing grace* in the hands of a merciful GOD, to keep us from those

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<sup>171</sup> For more on “common grace” in the Reformed tradition, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 657-668.

<sup>172</sup> *Christian Library*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library/vol26/CL26Part2.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/vol26/CL26Part2.htm) (accessed February 1, 2009). Italics added.

courses which would otherwise assuredly end in our confusion. This is most certain, that there is no enjoyment which the nature of man is either desirous or capable of, but may be to him a direct inducement to sin, and consequently is big with mischief, and carries death in the bowels of it.<sup>173</sup>

Wesley's version of South's *Prevention of Sin* included in the *CL* thus blends the ideas of a) God coming before humanity in grace with b) the benefit of this prevenient activity hindering the effects and allure of sin in a person's life. In this sermon, the term "preventing grace" is used in both of these senses.

As the editor of the voluminous work, Wesley developed his doctrine of prevenient grace through the writings of previous authors in his *CL*. Wesley was able to show through the various writings the ideas that God's prevenient grace comes before humanity in order to awaken sinners, enlighten the conscience, and restrain wickedness and that these ideas were part of a broad Christian tradition with which his doctrine of prevenient grace was in continuity. In the *CL* and in his other writings throughout the 1750s, Wesley continued to delineate the benefits of prevenient grace.

One of the benefits of prevenient grace that Wesley indicates is the re-inscription of the moral law on the human heart as a benefit of Christ's atoning work. In his 1750 sermon *The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law*, Wesley connected the partial re-inscription of the moral law upon humanity's heart with the "true light which enlightens every man," a reference to John 1:9

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., Italics added. I have been unable to locate an original version of this sermon, but I have found other usages of the term "preventing grace" in Robert South's original works in which South used prevenient grace in both senses simultaneously as in his sermon on Psalm 144:10: "King Abimelech was about to do an action that would certainly have drawn death and confusion after it. *Thou art but a dead man* (says God to him) in Gen. XX. 3. But preventing grace snatched him from the brink of destruction, and delivered him from death by restraining him from the sin: *I withheld thee* (says God in the 6<sup>th</sup>) *from sinning against me.*" See Robert South, *Twelve Sermons upon Several Subjects and Occasions*, 6th ed. (London: J. Bettenham, 1727), 476. Italics in original.

which Wesley earlier indicates was the substance of prevenient grace in the preface to his *An Extract on the Life and Death of Mr. Haliburton* in 1741.<sup>174</sup>

Wesley indicates that after the Fall, human understanding was darkened and all of humanity was estranged from God:

And yet God did not despise the work of his own hands; but being reconciled to man through the Son of his love, he in some measure re-inscribed the law on the heart of his dark, sinful creature. ‘He’ again ‘showed thee, O man, what is good’ (although not as in the beginning), ‘even to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.’ And this he showed not only to our first parents, but likewise to all their posterity, by ‘that true light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world’.<sup>175</sup>

Wesley indicates that the re-inscription of the moral law on the human heart is a benefit of Christ’s incarnation and atonement, a benefit given even before God was incarnated in Jesus Christ. This re-inscription provides for all humanity a general sense of morality. Again, Wesley attributes all the good in humanity – this time morality and conscience – to God’s prevenient initiative through the “true light.” It is noteworthy that the re-inscription does not restore to humanity to a pre-Fallen state of conscience. Wesley recognized that the effects of the Fall are only mitigated by prevenient grace, not completely reversed. Wesley’s parenthetical statement, “although not as in the beginning,” indicates that re-

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<sup>174</sup> See also Wesley’s indication in 1750 that the golden rule is engraved on “everyone that comes into the world.” *Works* [BE], 1:660-661. Wesley also connects the “true light” with the enlightening of Noah and his descendents with “some traces of knowledge, both with regard to the invisible and the eternal world” in Wesley’s sermon, *Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith* written in 1788. *Works* [BE], 4:52.

<sup>175</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:7. Wesley indicated two years later (1752) in *Predestination Calmly Considered*, a treatise written in order to reject the Reformed doctrine of predestination, that “His [God’s] first step is to enlighten the understanding by that general knowledge of good and evil... Thus far he proceeds with all the children of men, yea, even with those who have not the knowledge of his written word.” Albert Outler ed., *John Wesley*, 450.

inscription of the moral law was only to a *degree* and not a complete re-inscription.

Wesley's provided his most explicitly biblical support for his doctrine of prevenient grace when he published his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* in 1755. In this translation of the Greek New Testament along with his brief notes, Wesley mentions "preventing grace" twice. The first reference is found in the *NT Notes* on Matthew 13:20. The biblical context of Wesley's note on Matthew 13:20 is Jesus' Parable of the Sower:

Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and considereth *it* not, the wicked one cometh, and catcheth away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the way side. *But he that received the seed into stony places, is he that heareth the word, and immediately receiveth it with joy; Yet hath he not root in himself, and so endureth but for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway he is offended.* (Matthew 13:18-21)<sup>176</sup>

Wesley's note on Matthew 13:20:

The seed sown *on stony places*, therefore *sprang up* soon, because it did not sink deep, (verse 5). *He receiveth it with joy* - Perhaps with transport, with ecstasy: struck with the beauty of truth, and drawn by the preventing grace of God.

Here, in the first mention of preventing grace in the *NT Notes*, Wesley indicates that the person is "struck with the beauty of truth," but that it is "preventing grace" which does the "drawing" of a person to God. Wesley indicates in his notes on verse 21 that there is "no deep work of grace; no change in the ground of his heart," which is evidenced by Jesus' later words that the person does not endure due to having "not root in himself." Yet "preventing grace" has done its work in the drawing of a person. Wesley does not indicate whether the drawing

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<sup>176</sup> Matthew 13:20 italicized for clarity.

of preventing grace continues after the human re-action is a rejection of God's grace, but it is clear that the "drawing" is previous to any human action toward God.

In John 1:9, Wesley saw another benefit of prevenient grace: the restoration of conscience. This biblical passage, which Wesley used most often to support his doctrine of prevenient grace, is located within the prologue to John's Gospel:

There was a man sent from God, whose name *was* John. The same came for a testimony, to testify to the Light, that all through it might believe. He was not the Light, but *was sent* to testify to the Light. *This was the true Light, who lighteth every man that cometh into the world.* He was in the world, and the world was made by him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he the privilege to become the sons of God, to them that believe in his name: Who were born, not of blood, nor by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but of God.<sup>177</sup>

In Wesley's note on John 1:9, he writes:

*Who lighteth every man* – By what is vulgarly termed natural conscience, pointing out at least the general lines of good and evil. And this light, if man did not hinder, would shine more and more to the perfect day.

Wesley points out here that the enlightening of the "true light" provides for humanity the faculty of conscience. He is careful to connect the enlightening of conscience to the work of the Son of God and not to any source apart from God. This is Wesley's Christological dimension of prevenient grace. Wesley also indicates in this note the responsive nature of this enlightening: if they do not "hinder" the preveniently given light, human beings will be increasingly enlightened as they respond positively to the light.

Wesley maintains that prevenient grace is mediated through the creation in

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<sup>177</sup> John 1:9 italicized for clarity.

his *NT Notes* on Romans 1:19. Wesley does not mention “preventing grace” but refers to the presence of God’s prevenient activity to reveal the knowledge of God to humanity by the substance of prevenient grace, the “true light.” The biblical context of Wesley’s note on Romans 1:19 is Paul’s statement on the wrath of God being revealed:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who detain the truth in unrighteousness; *For what is to be know of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it to them.* For those things of him which are invisible, both his eternal power and Godhead, are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood by the things which are made; so that they are without excuse.<sup>178</sup>

Wesley’s note on Romans 1:19:

*For what is to be known of God* - Those great principles which are indispensably necessary to be known. *Is manifest in them; for God hath showed it to them* - By the light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world.

It is the “true light,” or prevenient grace, that reveals God’s omnipotence and being in and through the creation.

In his second statement on prevenient grace in the *NT Notes*, Wesley extends the benefits of prevenient grace further than simply revealing God through the creation. This second mention of “preventing grace” in the *NT Notes* is from Romans 2:14. The biblical context of Wesley’s note here is Paul’s explanation of God’s righteous judgment of both Jews and Gentiles:

For as many as have sinned without the law shall also perish without the law: and as many as have sinned under the law shall be judged by the law; For not the hearers of the law *are* just with God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. *For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, not having the law, are a law to themselves:* Who show the work of the law written upon their hearts,

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<sup>178</sup> Romans 1:19 italicized for clarity.

their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts among themselves accusing or even defending *them*; In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus according to my gospel. (Romans 2:12-17)<sup>179</sup>

Wesley's note on Romans 2:14 reads:

*For when the gentiles* - That is, any of them. St. Paul, having refuted the perverse judgment of the Jews concerning the heathens, proceeds to show the just judgment of God against them. He now speaks directly of the heathens, in order to convince the heathens. Yet the concession he makes to these serves more strongly to convince the Jews. *Do by nature* - That is, without an outward rule; though this also, strictly speaking, is by preventing grace. *The things contained in the law* - The ten commandments being only the substance of the law of nature. *These, not having the written law, are a law unto themselves* - That is, what the law is to the Jews, they are, by the grace of God, to themselves; namely, a rule of life.

In this second mention of “preventing grace” in the *NT Notes*, Wesley indicates that the heathens’ (Gentiles’) seemingly natural observance of the law, when they do not have the special revelation of law or gospel, is still due to God’s grace. It is “preventing grace” which empowers the heathens to obey the law even when they do not have the written law that the Jews do. Wesley does not attribute any good act to the natural person but ascribes all goodness, in this case the observance of the law, to the prevenient grace of God.

In his July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1756 journal entry, Wesley noted his observations of the Methodist revival concerning the way in which God went about the work of awakening people. He wrote:

At first curiosity brings many hearers: At the same time God draws many by his *preventing grace* to hear his word, and comforts them in hearing. One then tells another. By this means, on the one hand, curiosity spreads and increases, and, on the other, drawings of God’s Spirit touch more hearts; and many of them more powerfully than before. He now offers grace to all that hear; most of whom are in some measure affected, and

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<sup>179</sup> Romans 2:14 italicized for clarity.

more or less moved, with approbation of what they hear, desire to please God, and good-will to his messenger: These principles, variously combined and increasing, raise the general work to its highest point.<sup>180</sup>

Wesley indicates here that it is prevenient grace which draws people to hear the word preached and provides them with some resonance or “comfort” in the hearing of the word. Wesley reveals that he believes prevenient grace produces the “desire to please God” along with warm feelings toward the preacher. The “good desires” which are prayed for in earlier references to the work of prevenient grace are brought to “good effect” chiefly in the desire to please God. It is prevenient grace which provides the initial desire to desire God.

In 1757, Wesley published his largest doctrinal work, *The Doctrine of Original Sin According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience* in which he illustrated the sheer graciousness of prevenient grace. Wesley’s treatise was a response to Dr. John Taylor’s *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin* (1740), a very influential work in the eighteenth century era of enlightenment which challenged the traditional doctrine of Original Sin as being anachronistic. Taylor’s work was very optimistic about human nature. Wesley responded strongly against Taylor’s work with *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, arguing that the corruption of humanity was an essential teaching of Christianity as the foundation for conversion and the new birth.<sup>181</sup> Quoting Taylor’s treatise, Wesley indicates that it is God’s grace preveniently given, and not human desire as Taylor indicates, that produces human desires for more of the Spirit’s assistance:

Accordingly you say “His aids are so far from supposing the previous inaptitude of our minds” (to the being born again), “that our previous

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<sup>180</sup> *Works* [BE], 21:66. Italics added.

<sup>181</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 9:302-308.

desire of the Spirit's assistance is the condition of our receiving it." But who gave us that desire? Is it not God "that worketh in us to will," to desire, as well as "to do?" His grace does accompany and follow our desires: But does it not also *prevent*, go before, them? After this we may ask and seek farther assistance; and if we do, not otherwise, it is given.<sup>182</sup>

Wesley thus maintains that it is God's prevenient grace working in humanity which causes a restoration of desire for God, not antecedent human desire. It is not simply a restoration *to* God, but a restored desire *for* God.<sup>183</sup> Taylor, who represents a position that is similar to the "Early Wesley's" views on prevenient grace, holds that it is human desire which provides the condition for receiving more grace. Wesley, now in 1757, disagreed with Taylor's position, arguing that it is prevenient grace and not human desire which produces desires for more grace.

In his 1759 sermon, *Original Sin*, the distillation of his larger treatise *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Wesley provides some interesting insight into what he perceives some of the effects of God's prevenient grace to be:

The man, with all his good breeding and other accomplishments, has no pre-eminence over the goat. Nay, it is much to be doubted whether the beast has not the pre-eminence over him! Certainly he has, if we may hearken to one of their modern oracles, who very decently tells us:

Once in a season, beasts too taste of love:  
Only the beast of reason is its slave,  
And in that folly drudges all the year.

A considerable difference indeed, it must be allowed, there is between man and man, arising (beside that wrought by *preventing grace*) from difference of constitution and of education. But notwithstanding this, who that is not utterly ignorant of himself can here cast the first stone at another? Who can abide the test of our blessed Lord's comment on the seventh commandment: 'He that looketh upon a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart'? So that one knows

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 310. Italics added.

<sup>183</sup> Randy Maddox makes the helpful distinction that prevenient grace for Wesley not only restores faculties but also produces desires for God through these restored faculties. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 89 and Collins, *Holy Love*, 80.

not which to wonder at most, the ignorance or the insolence of those men who speak with such disdain of them that are overcome by desires which every man has felt in his own breast! The desire of every pleasure of sense, innocent or not, being natural to every child of man.<sup>184</sup>

Here Wesley indicates that all people are awash in the moral and spiritual corruption of original sin and yet some people are different from others due to their different responses to “preventing grace.” Only some people respond to the re-inscription of the moral law and the enlightening of conscience prior to justification; however, as Wesley indicates in this sermon, all humanity is under the domination of original sin, even those who have made initial responses to prevenient grace.<sup>185</sup>

In 1765 Wesley constructed his most comprehensive statement thus far on what he thought prevenient grace is and does in his sermon, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*. In this sermon based on Ephesians 2:8 he summed up his theology on the entire Way of Salvation. Wesley emphasized the point that “in the Christian life, all is of grace – ‘preventing’, ‘justifying’, ‘accompanying’, and ‘sanctifying’.”<sup>186</sup>

Wesley begins the sermon by asking the question, “What is salvation?” In answering it he provides his most comprehensive answer to date of what he thought prevenient grace is and does:

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<sup>184</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:180. Italics added. Albert Outler indicates (fn. 46) that the quotation is from Thomas Otway’s *The Orphan; or The Unhappy Marriage* which Wesley read at Oxford.

<sup>185</sup> Wesley recounts in his journal entry for June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1763 that he received a letter (from someone he does not identify) in which the author recounts his/her pilgrimage from unbelief to faith. Wesley includes a large section of this letter in his journal entry for the day. The letter includes the idea that God’s prevenient grace mercifully preserves one from evil even before conversion. The author of the letter recounts: “At what time I became a subject to my own will, I cannot ascertain; but from that time in many things I offended. First, against my parents; next, against God! And that I was preserved from outward evils was not owing to the purity of my own will, but the grace of Christ overruling and preventing me.” See *Works* [BE], 21:420.

<sup>186</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:154.

The salvation which is here spoken of might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory. If we take this in its utmost extent, it will include all that is wrought in the soul by what is frequently termed ‘natural conscience’, but more properly, ‘preventing grace’; all the ‘drawings’ of the Father, the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; all that ‘light’ wherewith the Son of God ‘enlighteneth everyone that cometh into the world’, *showing* every man ‘to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God’; all the *convictions* which his Spirit from time to time works in every child of man. Although it is true the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at least deny, that ever they had them at all.<sup>187</sup>

In this passage, Wesley explains his belief that what is thought of by the majority of humanity as the naturally occurring conscience, is in fact “preventing grace.”

As he did previously in *An Extract of the Life and Death of Mr. Thomas Haliburton* (1741), Wesley also suggests the complete Trinitarian function of prevenient grace: the Father draws the sinner to desire God; the Son enlightens the sinner to the general lines of morality; and the Spirit convicts the sinner of sin.

Wesley thinks that prevenient grace is given to “every child of man,” yet it is largely resisted by humanity. This is a significant development in his doctrine of prevenient grace, as it allows Wesley to hold together both the universal love of God – he gives prevenient grace to all - with the responsibility of humanity for their rejection of God because most resist prevenient grace. Wesley’s understanding of the vehement resistance of humanity to God is seen by his statement that “the generality of men stifle” the overtures of God’s prevenient grace “as soon as possible.” Wesley thought that the natural person had no inclination to move toward God whatsoever due to sin: in fact, as can be seen in

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<sup>187</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:156-157. Italics in original.

this later statement in the sermon, Wesley believed that it is only due to God's prevenient grace that one can repent of sin:

One thing more is implied in this repentance; namely, a conviction of our helplessness, of our utter inability to think one good thought, or to form one good desire; and much more to speak one word aright, or to perform one good action, but through His free, almighty grace, first *preventing* us, and then accompanying us every moment.<sup>188</sup>

For Wesley, salvation is all owing to the grace of God preveniently given to humanity. Grace is preveniently given all along the Way of Salvation. The distinctions Wesley made between preventing, justifying, sanctifying, and accompanying grace are only epistemological. By distinguishing between different dimensions of grace one can make sense of how God provides grace along the Way of Salvation. These distinctions between outpourings of grace are used to separate the major events of the Christian life from one another.<sup>189</sup>

In the middle years of Wesley's career, beginning with Aldersgate and culminating with his sermon *The Scripture Way of Salvation* in 1765, Wesley honed and developed his doctrine of prevenient grace. He perceived prevenient grace as coming before justifying grace along the Way of Salvation but still held that grace was prevenient all along the Way of Salvation. He developed his doctrine of prevenient grace amidst the theological controversies he was involved in at this time. In conflict with the Moravians over the means of grace, Wesley argued that prevenient

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<sup>188</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:166. Italics added.

<sup>189</sup> On April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1765 Wesley published his *OT Notes* where he mentions "preventing grace" in the *OT Notes* on Numbers 21:15; Joshua 22:31; 2 Kings 3:11; and Psalms 21:3 and 59:10. In each of these instances Wesley is referring to the broad sense of the prevenience of all grace. See section 2.2 of this thesis.

grace was mediated through the sacraments and that human response to grace was therefore required. In conflict with Church of England clergymen over the order of justification and sanctification, Wesley argued that prevenient grace prepared a thoroughly sinful person to respond to God by faith. In conflict with Calvinist theologians over the doctrine of predestination, Wesley argued that God's prevenient grace provided a universal revelation of God's salvation in Christ through the Spirit. As Wesley came closer to the later years of his career, these conflicts with Calvinist theologians continued to provide the historical context for the development of his thinking on prevenient grace.

### **3.4 The Later Wesley (Worsening Controversies with the Calvinists & *The Arminian Magazine*): 1765-1791**

Wesley continued to develop his doctrine of prevenient grace in the period of time known to Wesley scholars as the "Later Wesley." On November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1765 Wesley published the sermon *The Lord Our Righteousness* in which he made public his opinion that Christ's atoning death was the meritorious cause of the sinner's justification as opposed to the Calvinist position that Christ's death was the formal cause of the sinner's justification. Albert Outler comments on the importance of this distinction:

The doctrine of 'formal cause' implied some sort of correlated view of predestination and irresistible grace. The idea of 'meritorious cause' while still 'evangelical', allowed for prevenience, free will, and 'universal redemption'. To the Calvinists, however, this was merely a subtler form of works-righteousness, indeed of 'popery' or something very like it.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:445. Wesley had mentioned his siding on the 'meritorious cause' side of the debate earlier in the year in his sermon *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, *Works* [BE], 2:157-158, but according to Outler, it was the sermon, *The Lord Our Righteousness*, published later in 1765 which sealed the breach with the Calvinists.

With Wesley espousing a doctrine of the atonement in which Christ's death was the meritorious cause of the sinner's justification, the breach with the Calvinists, which had been growing for some time, became practically irreparable. The period beginning from this time until Wesley's death has become known in Wesley studies as the "Later Wesley."<sup>191</sup>

In this period, Wesley continued to speak of "preventing grace." In three chronologically successive sermons Wesley mentions prevenient grace. First, in *The Witness of the Spirit II* (1767), Wesley indicates that due to prevenient grace, people who are not justified can produce authentic degrees of the Fruit of the Spirit:

Yea, there may be a degree of long suffering, of gentleness, of fidelity, meekness, temperance, (not a shadow thereof, but a real degree, by the *preventing grace* of God) before we are 'accepted in the Beloved', and consequently before we have a testimony of our acceptance. But it is by no means advisable to rest here; it is at the peril of our souls if we do.<sup>192</sup>

Next, in *The Repentance of Believers* (1767), Wesley indicates, following the *BCP* formulation, that every morally good thought or action by a human being is due to prevenient grace:

Leaning on our Beloved, even Christ in us the hope of glory, who dwelleth in our hearts by faith, who likewise is ever interceding for us at the right hand of God, we receive help from him, to think, and speak, and act, what is acceptable in his sight. Thus does he '*prevent* them that believe in all their doings, and further them with his continual help', so that all their designs, conversations, and actions are 'begun, continued, and ended in him'.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> As indicated by Albert Outler in *Works* [BE], 1:446.

<sup>192</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:298. Italics added.

<sup>193</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:349. Italics added. See Appendix I.

Finally, in the third sermon, *The Good Steward* (1768), Wesley asks the questions he imagines the Lord will ask of his “stewards” in regard to the use of the gifts and blessings. The most important question asked of the stewards was what they did with the grace that was given to them. Here Wesley reveals again the responsive human requirement to God’s grace. Wesley, taking the voice of the Lord, asks:

Above all, wast thou a good steward of my grace, *preventing*, accompanying, and following thee? Didst thou duly observe and carefully improve all the influences of my Spirit? Every good desire? Every measure of light? All his sharp or gentle reproofs?<sup>194</sup>

In these three successive sermons, written during a period in which Wesley was being criticized by the Calvinists for having a doctrine which teaches “works-righteousness,” Wesley regularly employed the term “preventing grace” in order to teach that every good in humanity is due to God’s prevenient grace, but also that God requires an essential human response to that grace.

In 1770 Wesley published his second edition of *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy*.<sup>195</sup> Wesley composed the *Survey*, drawn largely from other authors, in order to “to display the invisible things of God, his power, wisdom, and goodness” in the natural creation.<sup>196</sup> In chapter two, section three, of the *Survey* entitled, “Of the

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<sup>194</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:296. Italics added.

<sup>195</sup> Wesley published the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the *Survey* in 1763 in two volumes, the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 1770 in three volumes, the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition in 1777 in five volumes (the 4<sup>th</sup> edition in 1784 was also in five volumes, and a 5<sup>th</sup> edition was printed in 1809 in five volumes by Maxwell & Wilson). The 1763(1<sup>st</sup>) edition that I have seen does not include Wesley’s note on “preventing grace.”

<sup>196</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 14:300. Wesley indicates in his sermon *The Imperfection of Human Knowledge*. (1784) that “from his works, particularly his works of creation, we are to learn the knowledge of God.” See *Works* [BE], 2:571.

Improvement of Knowledge by Revelation,” Wesley is republishing the writing of Peter Browne in which he uses Browne’s statement that

We have now brought the mind of man, by several steps, to the utmost knowledge it can reach by its own faculties. Whatever is beyond that contained under the foregoing heads, is communicated to it from heaven. When we observe, 1. The more particular and full discoveries of those relations we had some knowledge of, by the light of nature ;\* and, 2. Those relations we bear to God, and God to us, which are entirely new, and undiscoverable by the light of nature: this knowledge includes the foundation and substance of all revealed religion.<sup>197</sup>

Wesley’s footnote (\*) directs the reader to the bottom of the page in which he indicates that “I believe all ‘the light of nature,’ so called, to flow from *preventing grace*.”<sup>198</sup> It is evident from this footnote added to Browne’s text that Wesley wanted to emphasize that all that human beings know of God through creation is not “natural” in the sense that this knowledge is abstract from God. Rather, God, by his prevenient grace, reveals himself through the natural creation. Wesley is careful to point out that in this God-centered understanding of the natural creation, creation is a means of prevenient grace. Wesley was meticulous to emphasize that even this general revelation finds its origin in God.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> John Wesley, *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/wesley\\_natural\\_philosophy/appendix.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/wesley_natural_philosophy/appendix.htm) (accessed on January 22, 2009).

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, Italics added. The original in Browne reads “We have now by several steps brought the mind of man to the utmost bounds of that knowledge, which it can possibly arrive at by the strength of its own unassisted faculties; and where all the declared enemies of revelation and mystery take up their rest. Whatever knowledge it obtains beyond that included under the foregoing heads, is communicated from heaven. Accordingly, when the mind comes to learn and consider first, the more particular and full discoveries which are made to us of those relations we had already some knowledge of by the light of nature; and secondly those relations we bear to God, and he to us, which are intirely (sic) new and undiscoverable by reason; this knowledge includes the substance and foundation of all reveal’d religion.” Peter Browne, *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Understanding* (London: William Innys, 1728), 290-291.

<sup>199</sup> In the 1770s, Wesley was involved in many theological disputes with several Calvinists over his 1770 Conference Minutes. In 1772, Wesley wrote *Some Remarks on Mr. Hill’s Review* which was a response to Mr. Rowland Hill’s *Review of All the Doctrines taught by Mr. John Wesley*.

In a letter to Mr. John Mason on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1776, Wesley stated that prevenient grace provides the beginning of spiritual life to every human being and that grace and life are measured in degrees. In this letter, Wesley was advising Mason on the Calvinist position of the “natural man” in relation to his own position:

One of Mr. Fletcher’s Checks considers at large the Calvinistic supposition, “that a natural man is as dead as a stone;” and shows the utter falseness and absurdity of it; seeing no man living is without some *preventing grace*; and every degree of grace is a degree of life.<sup>200</sup>

Here Wesley indicates the universal scope of God’s restorative grace; that this grace restores a spark of life; and that there are degrees of life; all of which is due to prevenient grace. Wesley goes on in the letter to explain how the spiritual deadness caused by the Fall is overcome in every human life:

That “by the office of one, judgment came upon all men” (all born into the world) “unto condemnation,” is an undoubted truth; and affects every infant, as well as every adult person. But it is equally true, that, “by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men” (all born into the world, infant or adult) “unto justification.” Therefore, no infant ever was, or ever will be, “sent to hell for the guilt of Adam’s sin;” seeing it is cancelled by the righteousness of Christ, as soon as they are sent into the world.<sup>201</sup>

Wesley explains that the guilt of Adam’s sin imputed to all his descendants is cancelled due to Christ’s righteousness imputed, in this carefully restricted sense, to all his descendents. Wesley asserts here that Christ’s righteousness is given to all human beings through prevenient grace which restores their ability to be able to either reject or respond to further grace. Wesley is very clear that this is not

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Wesley indicated that “both Mr. F[letcher] and Mr. W[esley] absolutely deny natural free will. We both steadily assert that the will of man is by nature free only to evil. Yet we both believe that every man has a measure of free-will restored to him by grace.” See *Works* [Jackson], 10:392.

<sup>200</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 12:453. Italics added.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

justification; it is simply the beginning stages of regeneration previous to justification and the new birth which makes justification and the new birth possible.<sup>202</sup>

Further to the development in the 1740s when he began to explicitly hone his doctrine of prevenient grace as a middle-of-the-road soteriological alternative to the Reformed doctrine of predestination on the one hand and semi-Pelagian soteriology among some Church of England clergy on the other, in the “Later Wesley,” Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace continued to develop as a direct result of controversies with the Calvinists over predestination and free will. As these controversies continued, Wesley began to publish *The Arminian Magazine* (*AM*) in 1778 in response to several magazines published by Calvinists. Wesley’s purpose for the magazine was clear from its original subtitle: “Consisting of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption.” He later modified the subtitle in 1785 to “Consisting *Chiefly* of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption” as his purposes for the magazine expanded, but the major thrust of the magazine continued to be the assertion of the universal nature of God’s salvation. Thus the magazine was a direct theological attack on the Reformed doctrine of predestination.

Between 1781 and 1782, Wesley translated and published Sebastian Castellio’s *Dialogues On Predestination, Election, and Free Will* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1578) in monthly segments in the *AM*. He thought Castellio’s *Dialogues* would be good

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<sup>202</sup> Wesley held that “By the merits of Christ, all men are cleared from the guilt of Adam’s actual sin” at least as early as 1744. See *Works* [Jackson], 8:277. In these Conference minutes for 1744 Wesley indicates some of the benefits human beings receive due to the obedience and death of Christ are “Their souls receive a capacity for spiritual life” and their souls receive “An actual spark or seed thereof.” See *Works* [Jackson], 8:277-278.

for the Methodist people to read since Castellio presented a critical view of John Calvin's treatment of predestination during the Reformation. In the June 1782 edition of the *AM*, Wesley translated and published this section of Castellio's *Dialogues* on the topic "Of Free Will":

There are two things which invite men to know and then love God. One is, the visible work of God, wherein his invisible things are seen, even his eternal Power and Godhead: The other is, the Law of God, that is, whatever is contained in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Gospel. For the sum of both the Law and the Gospel is To love God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Now not only Scripture, but the very frame of nature (*by the preventing grace which is given to every man*) invites those who have not the Scripture, to reverence God and love their neighbor.<sup>203</sup>

The statement on "preventing grace" is likely an editorial edition by Wesley as it is parenthetical and does not fit in with the flow of the paragraph. It is "preventing grace," as conveyed through the natural creation, which reveals to all humankind God's omnipotence and divine nature and invites them to obey the moral law, a notion which was in accordance with Wesley's *NT Notes* on Romans 1:19.<sup>204</sup>

Albert Outler notes that Wesley's use of such an obscure theological document such as Castellio's *Dialogues* indicates that Wesley "had analyzed these old controversies with skill and shrewdness and has chosen his options in accordance with a self-chosen image he was willing for the world to see."<sup>205</sup>

Wesley's probable inclusion of the phrase "by the preventing grace which is given

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<sup>203</sup> *The Arminian Magazine* (London: J. Paramore, 1782), 283-284. Italics added.

<sup>204</sup> Albert Outler indicates that Wesley has provided the only English translation that exists of Castellio's *Dialogues*. See *Works* [BE], 1:28. It is therefore difficult to discover whether or not Castellio used the term "preventing grace" or, more likely, whether Wesley added this interpretive addition to Castellio's text. Regardless, Wesley's editorial control over the *AM* indicates that he approved this usage of "preventing grace."

<sup>205</sup> Outler, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage*, 92.

to every man” to Castellio’s statement of how nature invites humanity to reverence God was likely designed to safeguard his doctrine from attacks by critics who were looking for indications that Wesley taught that people could respond to God apart from grace.<sup>206</sup>

In 1785 Wesley published, *On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, a sermon based on Philippians 2:12-13 which is considered his most complete and careful explanation of the divine-human interaction in salvation, beginning with prevenient grace.<sup>207</sup> After indicating that the motive for God’s work in human salvation “lay wholly in himself – in his own mere grace, in his unmerited mercy,”<sup>208</sup> Wesley goes on to describe the necessary human response to God’s grace and how that grace comes to humanity:

[S]alvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) ‘*preventing grace*’; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight, transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life, some degree of salvation, the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.<sup>209</sup>

This passage is reminiscent of his sermon *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (1765) with its Trinitarian description of prevenient grace’s drawings of the Father, described here as “the first wish to please God,” the enlightening of the Son, described here as “the first dawn of light concerning his will,” and the convicting of the Holy Spirit, described here as “the first slight, transient conviction of

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<sup>206</sup> In 1784, Wesley would compose *The Sunday Service for the Methodists of North America*. This document included Wesley’s abridged version of the Church of England’s Articles of Religion which he reduced from 39 to 24 (the American Methodists included one Article to bring them to 25) but he included the Article “Of Free Will” with its statement on how people do good works acceptable to God only by “the grace of God by Christ preventing us.”

<sup>207</sup> As indicted by Albert Outler in *Works* [BE], 3:199 and by Herbert McGonigle in *John Wesley’s Doctrine of Prevenient Grace* (London: Moorley’s Bookshop, 1995), 3.

<sup>208</sup> *Works* [BE], 3:202.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 203-204. Italics added.

having sinned against him.” As in his letter to Mr. John Mason (1776), Wesley indicates that all of these imply a degree of life, “some degree of salvation.” It would appear that for Wesley, spiritual life is measured in *degrees*. The more one is awakened to God, the more that person is spiritually alive. The more one is asleep to God, the more that person is spiritually dead. These degrees are measured by the human response to grace. The more a person responds to grace preventively given, the more the spiritual senses are awakened.

In continuing with his theme of working out one’s own salvation, Wesley goes on in the sermon to ask, “But how are we to ‘work out’ this salvation?” He answers that we are to do the will of God from the heart and we are to stop sinning and start doing good works.<sup>210</sup> Wesley attacks the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, arguing that although the natural person is not only spiritually sick but dead,

Yet this is no excuse for those who continue in sin, and lay the blame upon their Maker by saying: ‘It is God only that must quicken us; for we cannot quicken our own souls.’ For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by *nature*, this excuses none; seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called ‘natural conscience’. But this is not natural; it is more properly termed ‘preventing grace’. Every man has a greater or lesser measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Everyone has sooner or later good desires, although the generality of men stifle them before they can take deep root or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And everyone, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 207. Italics in original.

Wesley again asserts that conscience is a gift of God but that it is not “natural” in the sense that it is a human faculty operating abstractly from God; rather, conscience is God-given prevenient grace operating in a person’s life, providing a sense of morality. Conscience, or prevenient grace, is given to every human being and is usually resisted to the point of no longer being perceptible. This resisting of God’s grace is human rebellion against God, which also continues on in greater degrees.<sup>212</sup>

Wesley’s last mention of prevenient grace was in 1788. Again he was addressing the subject of conscience, in his sermon *On Conscience*. This sermon is a summary statement on the subject of conscience, something Wesley had thought about throughout his entire ministry.<sup>213</sup> He begins the sermon with a definition of the term: “*Conscience*, then, is that faculty whereby we are at once conscious of our own thoughts, words, and actions, and of their merit or demerit, of their being good or bad, and consequently deserving either praise or censure.”<sup>214</sup> He goes on to indicate, as he did in his abridgement of his maternal grandfather Samuel Annesley’s sermon, *How We May Be Universally and Exactly Conscientious*, for the *Christian Library*, that the universal gift of conscience is not natural but is due to God’s grace:

This faculty seems to be what is usually meant by those who speak of ‘natural conscience’, an expression frequently found in some of our best authors, but yet not strictly just. For though in one sense it may be termed ‘natural’, because it is found in all men, yet properly speaking it is not *natural*; but a supernatural gift of God, above all his natural endowments.

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<sup>212</sup> Wesley mentions prevenient grace again in the concluding paragraph of the sermon: “Go on, in virtue of the grace of God preventing, accompanying, and following you, in ‘the work of faith, in the patience of hope, and in the labour of love’. *Works* [BE], 3:209.

<sup>213</sup> *Works* [BE], 3:479.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 481. Italics in original.

No, it is not nature but the Son of God that is ‘the true light, which enlighteneth every man which cometh into the world’. So that we may say to every human creature, ‘He’, not nature, ‘hath shown thee, O man, what is good’. And it is his Spirit who giveth thee an inward check, who causeth thee to feel uneasy, when thou walkest in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given thee.<sup>215</sup>

Here Wesley, in his most comprehensive statement on conscience, indicates that conscience is due to Christ’s enlightening and is applied by the Spirit’s convictions. He again reiterates that conscience is not natural but a gift from God.

Further to the notion of conscience as being a supernatural gift of God, Wesley argues against Francis Hutcheson when he continues to press the point in the sermon that conscience is not “natural,” as meaning abstract from God.

Hutcheson had argued that humanity had senses beyond the five external senses which were “natural” to humanity, meaning that they were not superadded by God. Hutcheson indicated that these additional senses included a “public sense” which generates compassion in a person for others who are suffering and a “moral sense” which generates approval for benevolence and disapproval for cruelty.<sup>216</sup>

Wesley accepts Hutcheson’s distinctions between types of senses but disagrees with Hutcheson on the source of these senses:

All this is in some sense undoubtedly true. But it is not true that either the ‘public’ or the ‘moral sense’ (both of which are included in the term conscience) is now *natural* to man. Whatever may have been the case at first, while man was in a state of innocence, both the one and the other is now a branch of that supernatural gift of God which we usually style ‘preventing grace’.<sup>217</sup>

Wesley is resolute in his conviction that conscience is not an endowment abstract from God – that is, not innate un-Fallen human nature – but rather “a branch” of

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 482. Italics in original.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 484. Italics in original.

prevenient grace. Thus, in his final statement on the subject, Wesley indicates that prevenient grace has different branches which are the various supernatural gifts of God to humanity.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

John Wesley developed the theological category “preventing grace” over his entire ministry within a specific historical context. Wesley initially thought of prevenient grace as the prevenience of all grace, an idea in continuity with broadly Arminian Church of England doctrine which Wesley found in the *Book of Common Prayer* and more particularly in the early stage of his career in the sermons of William Tilly; Wesley honed his doctrine of prevenient grace after Aldersgate through conflicts with Christians from Moravian, Calvinist, and Church of England backgrounds in the middle stage of his career; and Wesley provided some more conclusive statements about prevenient grace as the conflicts with the Calvinists grew more severe in the later stage of his career. Wesley thought that this supernatural grace of God is given preveniently to all humanity in order to make full redemption and restoration possible.

Wesley believed that the doctrine of prevenient grace is taught in Scripture, by the Church Fathers, and in the Church of England yet Wesley’s development of the doctrine included his own theological nuances. In light of the preceding analysis of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace, it is now appropriate to examine what missiological resources this doctrine provides for the mission of the church today.

## Chapter Four

# Missiological Implications of John Wesley's Doctrine of Preventive Grace

### 4.1 Introduction

Discerning the missiological implications of Wesley's doctrine of preventive grace for the contemporary church is not easy. William Abraham, considering the difficulties faced by a Wesleyan systematic theologian writes,

We have to cover a range of issues much wider than Wesley addressed. At the same time we simply cannot master the relevant data and information from Scripture, reason, experience and tradition to the extent possible for Wesley. In other words, the ideal of the Renaissance man has totally collapsed and we cannot hope to master all the relevant disciplines and information demanded by the very nature of theology itself and bequeathed to us by our heritage.<sup>218</sup>

The challenges of doing systematic theology from a Wesleyan perspective are similar to those faced in developing missiological implications from John Wesley's doctrine of preventive grace: the contemporary implications of preventive grace are much wider than the specific contexts in which Wesley wrote about preventive grace as the implications of the former are for a global church while Wesley was writing for a specifically British context. It is more difficult to address such extensive implications because the field of theological research is of course larger than at Wesley's time. No one can master all of the relevant data required in theology or the various related sub-disciplines in order to write comprehensively on the implications of preventive grace. Yet it is possible to extract from Wesley and the theological traditions from which he drew the

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<sup>218</sup> William J. Abraham, "Response: [to H. Ray Dunning's "Systematic Theology in a Wesleyan Mode"] The Perils of a Wesleyan Systematic Theologian," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 17, no.1 (Spring 1982): 23.

theological ore of prevenient grace and to provide something useful for the contemporary church.<sup>219</sup> Wesley observed that the doctrine of prevenient grace had a long history in Scripture, the theology of the Church Fathers, and the theology of the Church of England,<sup>220</sup> yet he developed his doctrine of prevenient grace in his own way within a particular historical context.<sup>221</sup> In the same way, I will draw from Wesley's theology in order to develop implications for the contemporary church context.<sup>222</sup>

Stemming from the analysis conducted in chapter three, below I make nineteen summary statements about Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. I will outline the nineteen summary statements from the historical analysis; add insights developed by some later scholars onto these summary statements; and provide some implications of prevenient grace for the contemporary mission of the church. For the sake of brevity, I have only drawn missiological implications from the concluding statements that were apparent to me; nevertheless, I have included all of the concluding statements due to their importance in understanding Wesley's thought.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> I am aware of the two significant assumptions made in this statement: 1) The assumption that Wesley was correct in his exegesis of Scripture (almost universally considered by Christians to be authoritative for theology) to reveal the presence of universal prevenient grace, and 2) The assumption that the benefits that Wesley connected to prevenient grace are real. If these assumptions are true, then Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace can provide something useful for the contemporary church. The challenges of these assumptions to Wesleyan theology in regard to prevenient grace are indicated in Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 207-209.

<sup>220</sup> See chapter two of this thesis.

<sup>221</sup> See chapter three of this thesis.

<sup>222</sup> In this thesis I have attempted to take up Albert Outler's insightful suggestion for Wesley scholars to go back to Wesley and his sources and then to go forward into contemporary contexts. See Albert C. Outler, "A New Future for Wesley Studies: An Agenda for 'Phase III'," in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, 125-144.

<sup>223</sup> The concluding summary statements will be numbered and single spaced for clarity. I have presented these concluding statements in the chronological development of Wesley's doctrine of

## 4.2 Concluding Summary Statements and Missiological Implications

The following theological framework is designed to help the Church evaluate its engagement in mission in order to see how a church's ministry is relating to God's prevenient grace already at work in a culture:

- a) Destructive mission: work which "takes away" from the benefits of prevenient grace.
- b) Redundant mission: work that does not improve upon the benefits of prevenient grace or work that has already been accomplished by the benefits of prevenient grace.
- c) Effective mission: work which "improves" upon the benefits of prevenient grace.

The warrant for applying this theological framework to the church's engagement in mission comes from the idea Wesley put forth in his sermon, *An Israelite Indeed* (1785), the notion that grace can be "improved" upon or "taken away" by God due to human responses to previous grace: "whoever improves the grace he has already received, whoever increases in the love of God, will surely retain it. God will continue, yea, will give it more abundantly: Whereas, whoever does not improve this talent, cannot possibly retain it. Notwithstanding all he can do, it will infallibly be taken away from him."<sup>224</sup> A Wesleyan understanding of the church's engagement in mission must be considered as a response to grace. Thus, the church can "improve" upon or "take away" from God's prevenient interaction

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prevenient grace discussed in chapter three of this thesis instead of in a systematic presentation of the conclusions. Although a systematic presentation may read more easily, Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace was not systematically but contextually developed.

<sup>224</sup> *Works* [BE], 3:284. See Wesley's statement, "To use the grace we have, and now to expect all we want, is the grand secret." *Works* [BE], 3:207, fn. 52.

with humanity. This mission effort can therefore be classified as destructive, redundant, or effective.

Here then are nineteen concluding statements about Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace and some missiological implications of this doctrine for the contemporary church.

- 1) Adopting the semi-Pelagian theology of William Tilly, the "Early Wesley" (1725-1738) seems to connect prevenient grace with baptism and the initial regenerating work of the human spirit before justification, yet he indicates that there is need before justification for human striving to prepare the human spirit for justification.
- 2) After Aldersgate, the "Middle Wesley" (1738-1765) repudiates his earlier idea of grace-empowered human preparation of the soul for justification and indicates the unilateral action of God through prevenient grace to initially regenerate the human spirit. Instead of speaking of preparing for grace, Wesley speaks of the pre-justified person in despair of his/her state before God.

James Torrance writes that the tendency among Christian leaders is to turn people back upon their own spiritual resources when they are in need of spiritual direction instead of directing them to God. He advises Christian leaders "to direct people to the gospel of grace – to Jesus Christ, that they might look to him to lead them, to open their hearts in faith and in prayer, and to draw them by the Spirit into his eternal life of communion with the Father."<sup>225</sup> The Middle Wesley was mature enough in his theological development to understand that turning people back upon their own spiritual resources when they are near justification does not help them find the relief found by trusting in Christ for justification by faith. This type of counsel by the church for those who have been awakened by God should be considered destructive mission as this counsel "takes away" from the benefits

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<sup>225</sup> James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 45.

of prevenient grace and leads people to an understanding of salvation as self-reformation and therefore, legalism. Effective mission for the awakened person would be for the church to help that person realize that the way to God is through faith and to help that person to place his or her faith in Christ as this counsel improves upon the awakening benefits of prevenient grace and leads on in the Way of Salvation.

- 3) Prevenient grace, initially given, is irresistible. It is after prevenient grace is first given that human beings can respond to God's grace by either receiving grace and moving on along the Way of Salvation or by rejecting grace. Rejection ("stifling") of prevenient grace is by far the more common response.

Kenneth Collins indicates that the existence of irresistible grace in the Wesleyan Way of Salvation comes as a surprise to Methodists who typically see irresistible grace as something within the Reformers' theology. Collins explains that due to the spiritual inertia caused by original sin, the ability for a person to accept or reject grace must be irresistibly restored.<sup>226</sup> Collins points out that what God does initially by giving prevenient grace constitutes the work of God alone.<sup>227</sup> As Randy Maddox indicates, calling prevenient grace "irresistible" is potentially misleading because people can actually resist prevenient grace,<sup>228</sup> thus the reason for my concluding statement that prevenient grace, *initially given*, is irresistible.

After initial awakening by prevenient grace, cultural context plays a role to some degree in how a person re-acts to prevenient grace. Mark Royster has written that all people "respon[d] to grace within a context of collective responses

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<sup>226</sup> Collins, *Holy Love*, 80.

<sup>227</sup> E-mail exchange between Kenneth Collins and Chris Payk, June 16, 2008.

<sup>228</sup> E-mail exchange between Randy Maddox and Chris Payk, October 30, 2007.

to grace.”<sup>229</sup> Royster therefore goes on to indicate that understanding existing patterns of response is crucial for effective evangelization. Royster points out that all people are in relationship both to God through prevenient grace and to the culture(s) in which they are located, a culture(s) which expresses collective, usually predominately negative, responses to grace which significantly impact individual responses to grace. Should individuals break with the collective responses to grace that their particular culture(s) offer to God, they stand in radical discontinuity with their culture(s) due to their non-conformity to it.<sup>230</sup> Wesley never explicitly dealt with prevenient grace’s impact on entire cultures except possibly with regard to prevenient grace’s restraint of evil; however, he did recognize that once people are awakened they must be separated into nurture groups or else they will regress in their spiritual and moral development.<sup>231</sup>

In light of the importance of corporate responses to grace, the absence of any sort of nurture groups in a church would be considered destructive mission. Effective mission must include the organizing of people into nurture groups in order to assist people as they develop morally and spiritually, beginning with those who have been awakened by prevenient grace and including those who are continuing to respond to the prevenience of all grace along the Way of Salvation. Wesley’s small group structure could be used as a model which would need to be contextualized by local churches in order to facilitate spiritual and moral

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<sup>229</sup> Royster, “Missiological Perspective,” 238.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-278.

<sup>231</sup> See Wesley’s Methodist community development for spiritual and moral nurture in *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists in Works* [BE], 9:253-280.

development (or “growth in grace”).<sup>232</sup> The express purpose, which would need to be periodically evaluated by church leaders, would be to evaluate if and how the people are growing in Christ-likeness, or to use a Wesleyan (and biblical) term, if and how are they recovering the “image of God.”

- 4) All of the persons of the Trinity are involved in the operation of prevenient grace. The Father draws, the Son enlightens, and the Spirit convicts. This is Wesley’s Trinitarian dimension of prevenient grace.

That Wesley broke from Augustinian theology in several aspects of his doctrine is significant for the missiological implications of Wesley’s Trinitarian dimension of prevenient grace. A case could be made that Wesley followed the Cappadocian Fathers in his Trinitarian understanding of prevenient grace as persons-in-relation providing the benefits of prevenient grace to humanity.<sup>233</sup>

Randy Maddox notes that “Wesley’s major reason for emphasizing the distinct ‘personhood’ of each of the Godhead would appear to be a preservation of the *relational* character of our experience of Divine grace in all its dimensions.”<sup>234</sup>

Wesley’s relational understanding of God’s operation in prevenient grace has implications for the way the church understands salvation itself. Salvation is not simply “going to heaven when you die” but also the recovery and healing of broken relations in the present. As one is awakened by prevenient grace, the possibility of a restored relationship with God through the pardon of justifying grace begins. As this leads on into the new birth and sanctifying grace, relations

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<sup>232</sup> For an interesting model of Wesley’s personal faith development from a developmental perspective, see James Fowler, “John Wesley’s Development in Faith,” in *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions* (ed. M. Douglas Meeks; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985), 172-195.

<sup>233</sup> For more on the difference between Augustinian Trinitarian theology and Cappadocian Trinitarian theology, see Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 1991), 30-55.

<sup>234</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 138. Italics in original.

with others, within the self, and with the non-human creation itself have the potential to be healed.<sup>235</sup> Destructive (or at least redundant) mission of the church would merely emphasize the “going to heaven when you die” aspect of salvation. Effective mission would be to emphasize the fullness of the pardoning and healing potential inherent in prevenient grace as people respond to it positively and move on along the Way of Salvation to deepening experiences of God’s grace.

- 5) Prevenient grace is not a “substance” but rather the interaction of the personal presence of the Triune God with humanity.

Randy Maddox has been a very strong proponent of the view that Wesley held to an Eastern Patristic notion of uncreated grace where grace is not only the pardon of the divine judge but also “the transforming *power* of God in human life.”<sup>236</sup> Prevenient grace then is God’s intimate involvement in human life. In terms of the personal presence of the Triune God interacting with humanity, Victor Shepherd writes that “while I am not aware that Wesley ever speaks formally of Jesus Christ as the substance of prevenient grace, plainly ‘the Son of his love’ *is* this as he forges himself within all men and women everywhere, apart from which the explicit declaration of the gospel would be pointless.”<sup>237</sup>

As in the fourth concluding statement on the Triune God’s interaction with humanity, the fundamental issue in this concluding statement is the relational nature of Wesley’s concept of all grace, including prevenient grace. Since grace

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<sup>235</sup> For more on the potential of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace to provide the possibility for healing in human relationships, see Michael G. Leffel, “Prevenient Grace and the Re-Enchantment of Nature: Toward a Wesleyan Theology of Psychotherapy and Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 2 (2004): 130-139.

<sup>236</sup> Maddox, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 37. Italics in original.

<sup>237</sup> Victor Shepherd, “John Wesley,” in *Reading Romans through the Centuries* (ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larson; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 156. Italics in original.

is a relational reality, effective mission for the church would be to understand and then articulate in its ministries the relational reality of God and the Christian life. Destructive mission would be for the church to articulate in its ministries a distant God and an individualistic understanding of the Christian life. This would take away from the potential of God's prevenient grace to restore intimacy between God and a person as prevenient grace moves on to justifying grace, and between people who are justified as justifying grace moves on to sanctifying grace.

- 6) According to Wesley, prevenient grace in the narrow sense ceases upon justification but Wesley continued to use the broad sense of the prevenience of all grace in his writings in what were usually allusions to the *Book of Common Prayer*.

This sixth concluding statement is critical for understanding Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. In Wesley's articulation of the Way of Salvation, prevenient grace is understood to end at the crisis point of justification. It would logically follow that he understood justifying grace to end at the crisis point of sanctification. Sanctifying grace would thus conclude at the point of death, that is, the crisis point of glorification. These different dimensions of grace are simply Wesley's distinctions used to describe the one grace of God. Thus, prevenient grace never really ends; rather, the function of God's grace changes as people respond to grace. Further discussion of this concluding statement carries on into the seventh concluding statement.

- 7) Prevenient grace, convincing grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace are epistemological distinctions Wesley adopted from various theological traditions to describe something that is unified – the grace of God.

The different dimensions of God's grace are all describing the one grace of God which always comes before human response. This is why Wesley could

speak of the prevenience of all grace. Following church tradition, Wesley made these distinctions with regard to God's grace, in part in order to clarify the distinction between the instantaneous and gradual aspects of the Way of Salvation. The goal in this life of the Way of Salvation (with glorification continuing this new life) is the recovery of the image of God. Missiological implications for this will be made for concluding statement #18 after I have provided more discussion on the Way of Salvation and different kinds of faith in Wesley's theology.

- 8) Prevenient grace (like all grace) is conveyed by *means*. Wesley is ambiguous on the issue of baptism being a means of prevenient grace, likely due to his desire to move baptized people away from trusting in a one-time experience. Yet it appears Wesley believed prevenient grace to be conveyed by means such as the Lord's Supper, prayer, reading the Scriptures, preaching, and interacting with the natural creation.

The means, or ways, through which God provides his prevenient grace, appear to have somewhat of a flow in Wesley's theology. The natural creation provides an initial revelation of God to all people and those who are exposed to special revelation (Torah and gospel) can be further awakened by preaching and other means. If a person responded positively to preaching then, as Maddox observes, Wesley quickly "ushered the awakened person into the society where the full battery of means of grace could nourish and guide their further journey on the Way of Salvation."<sup>238</sup>

In order for effective mission to be accomplished by the church, the "full battery" of the means of grace most useful within the particular context must be identified (to the furthest extent possible) and then resourced in corporate times

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<sup>238</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 229.

together. For example, church leaders would be wise to direct people into Bible study programs and to encourage regular attendance at the Lord's Supper and prayer meetings immediately upon peoples' conversion instead of expecting converts to show up at these events without direction. It would appear that inattention to the use of the full battery of the means of grace would be destructive as this would take away from the work accomplished by prevenient grace provided through the initial revelation of creation and then preaching.

- 9) Prevenient grace explains the existence of human good works among those who are not justified by faith.

It is significant that Wesley deleted Article XIII "Of Works Before Justification" from his version of the Articles of Religion which he prepared for the American Methodists in 1784. The Church of England's Article XIII indicated that works done before the grace of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit were not pleasing to God and therefore had the nature of sin. This appears incongruous with Wesley's idea that any good a person does, before or after justification, is *due* to the enabling of God's grace. These works are not meritorious but are nevertheless possible because of grace preveniently given to people. Although Wesley was certainly not an optimist about the moral nature of unregenerate people, it appears that for him, prevenient grace provides the moral capacity for people to do good things.<sup>239</sup> One could say that Wesley was even more jealous than the English Reformers who drafted Article XIII to attribute the praise for good works done by humanity both before *and* after justification to God.

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<sup>239</sup> For example, parents, though evil, giving good gifts to their children (Matthew 7:11).

Effective mission then would be to affirm good works which are done by people who are not Christians with the knowledge that these works are being motivated, or at least enabled, by God working preveniently in and through people. Good parenting, care for the environment, sustainable development, beautiful artwork, and countless other good works may be affirmed by Christians as authentically good in principle. In a truly Wesleyan spirit, it would be effective to both affirm the good done by people but to also call them to press on in their spiritual journey in order to find the one who generates and motivates the good in them – the God of grace. Destructive mission would be to attribute good works done by people to purely sinful inclinations, detracting from the developing work of grace that God may accomplish. It would also be destructive, and not consistently Wesleyan, to merely affirm the good and yet fail to call the workers of good beyond the prevenient experience of God’s grace to the more full experiences of God’s grace in justification and sanctification.

10) God’s prevenient grace must be responded to by a grace-empowered, yet resistible, human *re-action*.<sup>240</sup>

It is very significant that Wesley further developed in the English language the idea of *re-action*, as this captures a significant aspect of his theology.<sup>241</sup> By giving praise for human progress along the Way of Salvation to God’s preveniently given free grace and yet calling humanity to respond with a *re-action* that is un-coerced, Wesley steers a middle course between the extremes

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<sup>240</sup> Re-action to God’s grace is also connected to the idea of people making use of God’s preveniently given “talents” which he gives to all human beings. This is an important dimension of John Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace that I have not developed due to Wesley’s lack of explicit connection of prevenient grace to “talents,” but it is developed by Greg Crofford and is important due to its biblical moorings (Matthew 25) in Wesley’s theology. See Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 118.

<sup>241</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:436, fn. 26.

of moralism and determinism. This necessary re-action affirms God's valuing of humanity as "the impress of the divine being."<sup>242</sup> This middle course appears to hold together the biblical tension between God's sovereignty and human agency better than either extreme.

Effective mission then would be to ascribe progress in faith development to God and yet to call people to re-act to grace both in spiritual development along the Way of Salvation and in moral dimensions of human life.<sup>243</sup> A practical example of how church leaders could encourage this would be for preachers and teachers to focus on a passage such as Philippians 2:12-13 for an extended period of time in order to emphasize divine prevenience and essential human response in areas of life such as jobs, parenting, and finances in order to better equip the saints for the work of the ministry in all dimensions of life. Destructive mission would be to so magnify God's grace as to make human re-action insignificant or unimportant rather than essential in the progress of moral and spiritual development.

11) God's prevenient grace is what restrains human wickedness.

From Wesley's statements on God preventing evil through prevenient grace, Wesley appears to be saying that prevenient grace's operation in restraining evil is the unilateral work of God apart from human (re-action) agency.<sup>244</sup> God

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<sup>242</sup> Collins, *Holy Love*, 86.

<sup>243</sup> More needs to be said about the affectional nature of Christianity in John Wesley's theology in order to properly develop the theme of re-action for effective church mission. Succinctly put, human affections are developed for God when there is a deep understanding (cognitive development) of God which produces felt responses (psycho-social development) to God. For more on Wesley's affectional psychology, see Randy Maddox, "Psychology and Wesleyan Theology: Precedents and Prospects for a Renewed Engagement," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 2 (2004): 101-109.

<sup>244</sup> *Works* [BE], 1:526.

by his prevenient grace hinders evil in the world generally, and in particular, evil directed against the church. Because of the unpredictability and mysterious nature of radical evil and the unilateral action of God to preveniently restrain it, the only missiological implication that readily appears from this concluding statement is the call for the church to pray the Lord's Prayer and other prayers to restrain evil: to pray that God's Kingdom would come, that His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10) and that God would deliver His church from evil (Matthew 6:13).<sup>245</sup> It is also possible to pray a prayer of prevenient Trinitarian grace: that the Father would draw the evil doers to Himself; the Son would enlighten them, and the Spirit would convict the doers of evil of their wickedness. To emphasize the crucial importance of prayer, for all people to call upon God for the restraint of evil in the world would be effective mission in the church. To minimize and underestimate the role of prayer in the Christian life, particularly by giving the impression that prayer is the exclusive work of ordained ministers, would constitute destructive mission by the church.<sup>246</sup>

12) The overwhelmingly predominant biblical metaphor Wesley uses to describe prevenient grace is the Apostle John's metaphor of light (John 1:9). The "true light" is the life and work of Jesus Christ. In Wesley's writings, the "true light who lighteth every man" is synonymous with prevenient grace. This is Wesley's Christological dimension of prevenient grace.

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<sup>245</sup> Richard Foster describes prayers that restrain the influence of evil (both demonic and human) as "petitionary prayer" and "authoritative prayer." See Richard Foster, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 188-190 and 240-242.

<sup>246</sup> My emphasis on the unilateral work of God's prevenient grace in restraining evil is due to Wesley's only original contribution on the topic to emphasize the unilateral work of God in restraining evil against the church in his *Sermon on the Mount III*. See *Works* [BE], 1:526. However, the human response to God's prevenient desire to restrain evil has missiological implications as well. Examples of God enabled human desires to restrain evil could be found in the work of social service workers, police officers, and international peace-keepers among many others.

The recovery of the defaced image of God is the goal of Wesley's Way of Salvation.<sup>247</sup> The Way of Salvation begins with Christ, the "true light," (Logos) as He "enlightens" a person, which begins the recovery of the image of God and continues as through Christ one is increasingly conformed to his image, since Christ *is* the image of God. All people are enlightened by the true light, and yet not all are conformed to God's image due to human rejection of God.

For Wesley, prevenient grace thus has a definite Christological shape. To move away from this Christological shaping is to move away from what Wesley thought prevenient grace is and does. If the recovery of the image of God, defaced by the Fall, is the Christological shaping of prevenient grace, any statement that is made concerning what prevenient grace *does* must take this into account. It is therefore inappropriate to speak of prevenient grace in the Wesleyan tradition in a way that does not begin and end with Jesus Christ.

Effective mission will focus on this Christological shaping of prevenient grace with its function to restore the defaced image of God. How each person experiences God's initial awakening through prevenient grace will be unique. Church leaders therefore need discernment in order to understand whether the person has received and accepted the awakening and whether the person is then/now ready to move onto the next stage of faith, or whether instead the awakening has been rejected and the person needs to be re-awakened.

Destructive mission would be simply to assume that any person who has rejected grace has no hope of being re-awakened, or that anyone who has been awakened by prevenient grace should be content to stay in that degree of light. It would take

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<sup>247</sup> As indicated by Albert Outler in *Works* [BE], 1:117-118, fn. 5.

away from the benefits of prevenient grace not to encourage an awakened person to go on to further Christ-likeness along the Way of Salvation.

13) The effects of the “true light” are applied to all generations of human beings by the operation of the Holy Spirit. This is Wesley’s pneumatological dimension of prevenient grace.

The Spirit is the agent of prevenient grace. The life and work of Christ are located in (though not limited to) space and time. The work of the Spirit is to apply the work of Christ to all human beings in order to deliver the benefits of prevenient grace. Since this delivery of the benefits of prevenient grace is solely the work of God, it should not be surprising then that real degrees of awakening, faith, and good works occur throughout time and in places where the specific revelations of Torah and gospel have not been made. For Wesley, this is part of the prevenient work of the Spirit.

Effective mission will emphasize the present reality of the operations of the Holy Spirit as the agent of Christ (Christ’s Spirit). Although the world is awash in sin, the Holy Spirit awakens people to respond to the light they have been shown. Church leaders will need discernment to discover where the Spirit has been at work and then to develop that work. One practical way in which church leaders could attempt to discern the activity of the Spirit would be to do an analysis of where they have sensed God’s Spirit at work among them in the past. Then, through reflection on their present context, these leaders could begin to place ministry resources where they sensed the Spirit to be at work. Destructive mission will conceptualize the Christian faith in a way that ignores or denies the

Spirit as presently available to those beyond the specific revelations of Torah and gospel.

- 14) After the Fall, the enlightening by the Son, the “true light” which is prevenient grace, has re-inscribed the moral law in some measure on every human heart and has restored the human faculty of conscience. Conscience is not “natural” to humans but is one of the benefits of prevenient grace.

It is insightful to note that Wesley advised that when one was preaching to unbelievers, the Law of God should be preached first and then the gospel. Wesley thought it important to work with the faculties that God had restored first in order to convict and then to offer the comfort of the gospel.<sup>248</sup> He believed that prevenient grace has re-inscribed the law on the heart of every person, giving each one the ability to discern the basic lines of morality, creating humanity’s “inborn moral sense.”<sup>249</sup> The conscience tests each thought and deed according to that basic morality given to every human being. The moral sense and conscience are thus common gifts to humanity, no matter the culture or time.

C.S. Lewis writes that humanity’s moral sense is commonly known by the majority of humans as “the Law of Nature because people thought that every one knew it by nature and did not need to be taught it.”<sup>250</sup> N.T. Wright believes that humanity’s inborn moral sense is an inherent part of the human make-up. This moral sense is why humans long for justice and for “the world to be put to

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<sup>248</sup> *Works* [BE], 26:482-483. Letter “To an Evangelical Layman,” December 20, 1751.

<sup>249</sup> *Works* [BE], 2:2. Albert Outler indicates that the moral sense is not “natural” for Wesley but is attributable to the residual *Imago Dei*. It is important to note that even though the *Imago Dei* is residual, it is still from God as human beings are created by God in his image. Wesley was adamant throughout his ministry that all good that humanity enjoys is not due to “nature” in its atheistic sense but rather due to God’s prevenient grace. The bifurcation between “nature” and “grace” is a false dichotomy for Wesley because the good things provided by nature are also the gifts of God’s grace.

<sup>250</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1980), 5.

rights.”<sup>251</sup> In Wright’s opinion, this inborn moral sense and these longings reveal the echo of God’s voice, which points humanity to God.<sup>252</sup> The natural moral sense provided by prevenient grace’s partial re-inscription of the law and restored conscience provide humanity with a starting point for morality, although this morality has been severely damaged by the effects of the Fall.

Thus, effective mission will mean that Christians will consider crucial the work of justice-keeping as agents of God in the world. For example, justice keeping would include the use of resources and influence by church members to provide protection from abuse and advocacy for powerless people in order to help marginalized people meet needs that they are unable to meet. Due to prevenient grace, everyone knows justice should be done unless their conscience has been fully deadened; therefore, mission that would be redundant would be to simply call for justice without actually moving to action. Destructive mission of the church would be to stress that justice will be meted out in the afterlife, a teaching and modeling which would downplay and possibly negate the need for active justice-seeking in this life.

15) Prevenient grace is the source of the “light of nature” which reveals God’s omnipotence and divine being through the natural creation.

The “light of nature,” which Wesley saw as flowing from the natural creation (Romans 2:14), provides biblical support for care of the creation.<sup>253</sup> God has revealed himself through his creation by prevenient grace and therefore it is

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<sup>251</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 4.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, x. It is important to note that Wesley, Lewis, and Wright, all Church of England men, all indicate that these initial overtures of God’s grace call us to a deeper experience of God.

<sup>253</sup> For more on the potential of Wesley’s doctrine of grace to provide theological resources for creation care, see Howard Snyder, “The Babylonian Captivity of Wesleyan Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 39, no. 1 (2004): 16-24 and Theodore H. Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 8-12.

imperative to care for the creation because (among other things) it is God's means of initial revelation to all people. It would not be accurate to cite either Paul or Wesley as arguing that the full revelation of God is to be found in nature, as both would agree that the full revelation of God is found only in Jesus Christ. But Wesley's affirmation that creation reveals God's power and divine nature means by implication that God places high value on the natural creation. Human beings are of value because they are divine image bearers. Similarly, because God has chosen to reveal himself through the natural creation, God must place value in it.<sup>254</sup>

Consequently, in light of the divine value placed on the creation as the good gift of God and that creation is a means of providing the light of nature which is in fact, prevenient grace, effective mission will place a high value on care for the natural creation. A biblical model for a framework on creation care would be that of "humanity as stewards" (Genesis 1:28-30) where humans are placed as overseers in charge of the creation, bringing God glory through their stewardship and knowing that they will offer it back to God as ones who will give an account for their stewardship when Jesus returns. Destructive mission of the church would be to neglect this concern for the creation by adopting toward the natural non-human creation a theological stance that it is of little significance in God's plan. An example of this destructive work would be for church leaders to model a careless attitude toward the disposal of waste products, an irresponsible

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<sup>254</sup> For more on humanity's value as divine image bearers and the value of the natural creation see Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 100-117. I have developed the idea above that the creation is of value because it is a means of initial revelation. However, it also has inherent value as God's good gift.

use of natural resources, and a lack of consideration of sustainable development techniques for the physical church building(s).

16) God restores a measure of free-will to all humanity by prevenient grace.

Greg Crofford has noted that in its development after John and Charles Wesley, the doctrine of prevenient grace moved in a direction which de-emphasized grace and over-emphasized free will. Crofford observed this imbalance in the theology of Methodist theologians Richard Watson, John Miley, and Aaron Merritt Hill. Crofford writes, “For all three theologians, prevenient grace – where mentioned – appeared to be an afterthought. Emphasis was upon free moral agency, not upon the inability of humans to respond to God apart from grace.”<sup>255</sup> It is important to note two things in John Wesley’s thinking on free will. Both can be observed in his statement “every man has a measure of free-will restored to him by grace.”<sup>256</sup> First, it is a *measure* of free will. This “measure” frees a person’s will to respond to God or to reject God’s grace and sink back down into sin. It is not freedom to do whatever one wants to do. Second, free will is *restored* to humanity. The human ability to will anything other than to sin is regenerated by God’s prevenient grace. In this light, it may be more accurate to speak of *freed will* in the Methodist tradition<sup>257</sup> rather than the term *free will* since the latter has been used by generations of Methodists in a way that is neither biblical nor Wesleyan to speak of what a person’s will is able to do.

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<sup>255</sup> Crofford, “Streams of Mercy,” 236. It is quite likely that there were ideas about human autonomy that developed during the Enlightenment which dominated Methodist anthropology after the time of the Wesleys.

<sup>256</sup> *Works* [Jackson], 10:392.

<sup>257</sup> See corroboration for my statement on *freed will* in McGonigle, *Prevenient Grace*, 29.

Effective mission for the church would be to balance in its theology both the importance of divine prevenience in all matters of divine-human relations and to affirm the necessity of human re-action to God's prevenient activity in human life. Holding that God's prevenient grace frees the will to respond to grace safeguards all glory for God in salvation and yet maintains a role for authentic human willing in salvation. Destructive mission would be to blur this theological distinction and teach that people choose God out of their own free will. This would be destructive, as it plants in the human mind the view of humanity as being gracious to God by choosing Him rather than the biblical reality of God choosing humanity.<sup>258</sup>

17) The guilt of the sin of Adam, imputed to humanity, was cancelled by the righteousness of Christ, imputed in this restricted sense to humanity, by prevenient grace.

18) Wesley measured grace and spiritual life by "degrees." Some have only prevenient grace and are spiritually alive in that measured degree. Others have justifying grace through faith and are spiritually alive in that measured degree. Still others have sanctifying grace in which they are perfect in love and are spiritually alive in that measured degree. These are Wesley's epistemological distinctions which are the marking points along the Way of Salvation. Although there are distinct markers (justification, sanctification), the various dimensions of grace are intended to function as a cohesive theological whole. Wesley intended people to move on along the Way of Salvation from the initial awakening of prevenient grace to the perfecting love of sanctifying grace. Wesley thought that God would judge people based on the kind of faith (Wesley writes that there are "several sorts of faith")<sup>259</sup> they had based on the degree of revelation they were given.

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<sup>258</sup> This could be the start of a Wesleyan doctrine of election, a theological doctrine and biblical category often neglected in Methodist circles. God elects humanity by prevenient grace and yet provides a place for human will in the re-action of faith or unbelief. Those whose re-action is faith are the elect. Those whose re-action is unbelief are the reprobate.

<sup>259</sup> *Works* [BE], 3:493.

I now return to the debate between Kenneth Collins and Randy Maddox on prevenient grace.<sup>260</sup> It seems that Wesley held that people will be judged according to the faith they had based on the degree of revelation they had received;<sup>261</sup> therefore, one who has “the faith of a servant” who has only received revelation to that degree could be justified before God. Wesley writes in his sermon *On Faith* (1788),

But what is the faith which is properly saving? Which brings eternal salvation to all those that keep it to the end? It is such a divine conviction of God, and the things of God as even in its infant state enables every one that possesses it to ‘fear God and work righteousness.’ And whosoever in every nation believes thus far the Apostle declares is ‘accepted of him.’ He actually is at that very moment in a state of acceptance. But he is at present only a *servant* of God, not properly a *son*. Meantime, let it be well observed, that ‘the wrath of God’ no longer ‘abideth on him.’<sup>262</sup>

However, one who has “the faith of a servant” but who has been given the revelation which would enable him/her to have “the faith of a son” would not be justified before God. According to Wesley, it appears that with regard to justification, the absolute standard is that of God’s contextual awareness of each person’s kind of faith based on the revelation they had received, a divine awareness of faith which is beyond the scope of any human’s understanding. God alone knows who are justified by faith before him.<sup>263</sup>

Effective mission will include for church leaders, as spiritual directors, to be discerning in their knowledge of people’s spiritual life (as much as is possible) in order to guide them further along the Way of Salvation. Admittedly, this is not

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<sup>260</sup> See section 1.4c of this thesis.

<sup>261</sup> See *Works* [Jackson], 12:453, and *Works* [BE], 3:203-204.

<sup>262</sup> *Works* [BE], 3:497.

<sup>263</sup> Wesley’s understanding of the contextual sensitivity of God’s judgment for those outside of the “Christian dispensation” can be seen in *Works* [BE], 3:295-296 and 4:174. Wesley’s understanding of the contextual sensitivity of God’s judgment even for those within the “Christian dispensation” can be most clearly seen in his sermon *On Faith* (1788) in *Works* [BE], 3:491-501.

certain knowledge, yet there may be indicators that reveal the spiritual condition of a person.<sup>264</sup> For those expressing the “faith of a servant,” they should be encouraged to go on to the “faith of a son.” For those who have an assurance that they have the “faith of a son,” they should be encouraged to “go on to perfection.”<sup>265</sup> One way in which church leaders could try to provide spiritual direction for congregants would be to meet at set times (annually or bi-annually) in order to discuss premeditated questions that are focused on the spiritual life. Destructive mission would be for church leaders to have a cavalier attitude toward those who are content to have “the faith of a servant,” despite their having been given higher degrees of revelation, the revelation available to “the faith of a son”, and thus encouraging them to retain a false sense of security in the lower kind of faith. Destructive mission would also include the failure to call those expressing an assurance of the “faith of a son” to “go on to perfection.”

19) Those who do not have the special revelation of the Old or New Testaments are nonetheless given by God the natural creation; the partial re-inscription the moral law through prevenient grace; and the restored faculty of conscience through prevenient grace. This grace provides revelation of the existence of God and knowledge of morality such as the Golden Rule.

Matthew Schlimm has written a provocative paper comparing the parallelism of Ancient Near East (ANE) stories with Old Testament stories and the place of the Bible as God’s unique revelation to humanity.<sup>266</sup> Schlimm finds

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<sup>264</sup> Such indicators would be professions of faith combined with the Fruit of the Spirit. Again I reiterate that this is not certain knowledge but rather probable knowledge based on certain information of a person’s spiritual condition.

<sup>265</sup> This follows Wesley’s advice in *On Faith in Works* [BE], 3: 500-501 and in *On the Discoveries of Faith in Works* [BE], 4:35-36.

<sup>266</sup> Matthew R. Schlimm, “Wrestling with Marduk: The Authority of Scripture, Old Testament Parallels, and Prevenient Grace” (Presentation to the Wesleyan Theological Society, March 15,

in Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace an explanation for why various cultures have had revelations of divine activity in their sacred texts which are strangely similar to the ones revealed in the Bible. He writes: "As I learned about Wesley's doctrine of prevenient or 'preventing' grace, I began to wonder if maybe these ancient Near East parallels were instances where God had revealed the divine self to those in other religions through this form of grace."<sup>267</sup> In these biblical parallels, one finds a degree of sensitivity to God which makes possible the "degree of truth captured in non-biblical religions."<sup>268</sup> Tae Hyoung Kwon indicates that Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace "reveals a transcultural character and flexibility in context which is conducive to the general spread of the gospel."<sup>269</sup> The "transcultural character" of prevenient grace means that God's grace reaches all people irrespective of cultural context. That God's grace reaches all people irrespective of cultural context is evidenced by God's revelation of biblical parallels in the religious literature of the Ancient Near East.

This relational drawing of God's prevenient grace is a crucial issue. According to Wesley, prevenient grace is given by God to draw, enlighten, and convict humanity. Church leaders would be wise to analyze the ministries of the church in order to evaluate a) whether or not the divine-human relationship in

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2008), 1-7. Schlimm indicates that there are biblical parallels to some parts of the Enuma Elish, the Gilgamesh Epic, the stories of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh and the Code of Hammurabi.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 5. Italics in original. Clark Pinnock asserts that prevenient grace may be why other religions have some good aspects in them. See Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 103-106. For a fascinating account of God's prevenient activity among cultures throughout the world previous to Christian engagement, see Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures Throughout the World* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981).

<sup>269</sup> Kwon, "Missiological Dialogue," 204.

each ministry is the primary concern in order to pinpoint where ministry energies are being mobilized,<sup>270</sup> and b) to what extent the church's social, cultural, and worldview models are culturally sensitive in light of the transcultural character of prevenient grace so that these ministries can be effective in communicating the realities of the gospel. By discerning the activity of God's prevenient grace in a church's culture(s) to the degree possible, leaders may be able to evaluate how contextually sensitive church ministries are in relation to their host culture(s). These ministry activities and models may then be classified as destructive, redundant, or effective, based on how they re-act to the operations of God's prevenient grace operative within the culture(s).

Since God is at work preveniently in and across all cultures, to be effective, church engagement with people outside of the community of faith should seek to identify where God has been preveniently at work. This will require from the church significant research and listening skills in order to speak about God effectively.<sup>271</sup> From these first indications of God's activity among a people or in a person, the later stages of the Way of Salvation could develop.<sup>272</sup> Church engagement which could be destructive would ignore past history and begin to build on ideas about God which are completely foreign or distorted to the hearer. Another destructive possibility for church engagement with people from

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<sup>270</sup> I mentioned in section 1.4f of this thesis that one must be discerning in sensing post-Enlightenment individualism in this evaluation. The positive divine-human relationship evidences itself in positive human-self, human-human, and human-creation relationships and not in an individualistic understanding of soteriology which limits salvation to a divine-human restoration only. Wesley gives evidence for this fuller understanding of salvation in his sermons *The End of Christ's Coming in Works* [BE], 2:471-484, and *The New Creation in Works* [BE], 2:500-510.

<sup>271</sup> See Nareandra Singh, "The Significance of Prevenient Grace in Dialogical Proclamation," *TBT Journal: A Theological and Ethical Reflection for Responsible Living* 3 (2001): 51-64.

<sup>272</sup> This is the approach discussed in Al Truesdale, *With Cords of Love: A Wesleyan Response to Religious Pluralism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2006), 163-168.

outside the community would be to allow the parallels from other religions with the Bible to extend too far and thus to validate ideas about God that are contradictory to biblical revelation.

I have made these nineteen concluding statements on John Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace in order to provide some clarity on what Wesley thought prevenient grace is and does. In most cases, elaboration on the concluding statements has generated missiological implications for the contemporary church to reflect on in order to engage in more effective mission and to avoid the pitfalls of wasting resources on redundant or destructive mission. I will now make some suggestions for further research in order that Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace may be more fully developed for the benefit of the future church.

#### **4.3 Suggestions for Further Research**

1) In addition to his important suggestion for further biblical exegesis in order to reveal the biblical basis of prevenient grace, Greg Crofford has suggested a need "to explore those writings on prevenient grace between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, tracing the development of the doctrine through the Middle Ages."<sup>273</sup> In addition to this work, I suggest that there is need to explore the concept of prevenient grace (although not always the precise term) among the Latin, Greek, and Syrian Fathers (and Mothers!) before Augustine. This research would show if there was any consensus among these early theologians in their understandings of how God's prevenient grace operates and what effects this grace has. The significance of this work would be that it would reveal whether or

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<sup>273</sup> Crofford, "Streams of Mercy," 270.

not Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace was in the mainstream of Christian thinking on grace, or the degree to which his doctrine, following only a few of the theologians of the Patristic age, was novel.

2) There is also need to further tease out the Trinitarian dimensions of grace, beginning with prevenient grace, in Wesley's theology. This study could begin with an analysis of Wesley's doctrine of God. Was he Augustinian, Cappadocian, or a combination of both (or something else) in his understanding of the Trinity? From there, an analysis of Wesley's writings with a Trinitarian dimension would need to be conducted in order to see how Wesley conceived of the Triune God interacting with humanity. This theological work could help Methodists (and others) to conceive of a more robust theological anthropology as persons-in-relation as opposed to the prevailing individualistic anthropology that dominates much of the Northern hemisphere's churches.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

As is readily apparent from the concluding summary statements above, John Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace has manifold missiological implications for any contemporary context. Future researchers will tease out from Wesley's thinking on prevenient grace and the traditions he drew from more than I have done here. What is clear is that Wesley was relentless in ascribing any good in human life to God's grace. Some Wesley scholars have indicated that for Wesley, the Christian life is all of grace. It can equally be said that Wesley, due to his doctrine of prevenient grace, saw all good in human life, Christian or otherwise, is of grace. Each generation of Christians must discover in their unique

context the implications of God's prevenient grace. This is one of the ongoing responsibilities, and privileges, of the Christian life.

Appendix I  
*Book of Common Prayer (1662) Usages of*  
“Preventing Grace”<sup>274</sup>

Easter Day - *The Collect*

**ALMIGHTY** God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life; We humbly beseech thee, that as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Monday in Easter Week - *The Collect*

**ALMIGHTY** God, who through thy only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life; We humbly beseech thee, that, as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Tuesday in Easter Week - *The Collect*

**ALMIGHTY** God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life; We humbly beseech thee, that as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity - *The Collect*

**LORD**, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*The Collect (after the Oratory) - When There is No Communion*

**PREVENT** us O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Psalm 21

*Domine, in virtute tua*

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<sup>274</sup> All references in this appendix are from *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: John Baskerville, 1662), available online at <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1662/baskerville-htm>

THE King shall rejoice in thy strength, O Lord: exceeding glad shall he be of thy salvation.

2. Thou hast given him his heart's desire: and hast not denied him the request of his lips.

3. For thou shalt prevent him with the blessings of goodness: and shalt set a crown of pure gold upon his head.

*The Collect - For the Forms of Prayer to Be Used at Sea*

**PREVENT** us, O Lord, in all our doings, with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*The Collect – For the Making of Deacons*

**PREVENT** us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*After The Collect – For the Ordering of Priests*

**PREVENT** us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*After the Collect - In the Form of Ordaining of Consecrating of an Archbishop or Bishop*

**PREVENT** us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*Articles of Religion, X, Of Free Will*

**THE** condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will, and working with us when we have that good will.

XI.

## Appendix II

### References to “Preventing Grace” in John Wesley’s *A Christian Library*<sup>275</sup>

Wesley’s extract of Macarius’ Homily 17 (volume 1 of the *CL*) includes a reference to prevenient grace.

Wesley’s extract of Arndt’s *True Christianity* (volume 1 of the *CL*) has three references to prevenient grace.

Wesley’s extract of Richard Sibbs’ sermon on Canticles 5 (volume 6 of the *CL*) includes the statement that “Christ will blow upon us... to prevent us” with his grace.

Wesley’s extract of Nathaniel Culverwell’s *The Child’s Return* (volume 10 of the *CL*) includes a reference to “preventing love.”

Wesley’s extract of Bishop Thomas Ken’s *An Exposition of a Church Catechism* (volume 13 of the *CL*) includes four references to prevenient grace.

Wesley’s extract of *The Life of Bishop Bidell* (volume 16 of the *CL*) includes the statement “let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us.”

Wesley’s extract of the Letters of Mr. Samuel Rutherford (volume 16 of the *CL*) includes in the letter to John Steward the statement: “He has been pleased to prevent me in mercy, and to cast me into a fever of love for himself...”

Wesley’s extract of Anthony Horneck’s *The Happy Ascetic* (volume 16 of the *CL*) includes the statement “Nay, you cannot promise yourselves GOD’s preventing or restraining grace, to preserve you from falling into greater sins, while you continue in the lesser; for by these you drive away GOD’s SPIRIT, and thrust the ALMIGHTY from you.”

Wesley’s extract of Hugh Binning’s sermons on I John (sermon 3 on I John 1:5) (volume 17 of the *CL*) has two references to prevenient grace.

Wesley’s extract of Simon Patrick’s *The Christian Sacrifice* (volume 17 of the *CL*) includes the statement “Thou hast prevented all my desires, and secretly disposed me to choose thy ways.”

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<sup>275</sup> All references in this appendix are from *A Christian Library*, 30 vols. (London: T. Blanshard, 1819-1827), available online at [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/christian\\_library](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library)

Wesley's extract of Lewis Stuckley's *A Gospel Glass* (volume 19 of the *CL*) includes the statements "preventing mercies" and "preventing loving-kindness." Wesley does not name Stuckley as the author of *A Gospel Glass* in the *CL*.

Wesley's extract of Dr. Isaac Barrow's sermons (sermon 3 on Phil 4:11) (volume 21 of the *CL*) includes the statement that God's grace "preventeth us to seek" to be good Christians and that God "doth prevent us" in affection (sermon 6 on I Thess. 5:16).

Wesley's extract of Samuel Annesley's sermon on Acts 24:16 (volume 21 of the *CL*) includes two references to prevenient grace.

Wesley's extract of Dr. Calamy's sermon on Acts 10:38 (volume 23 of the *CL*) includes the statement "His goodness did often prevent men's desires, always surpass them; doing for them beyond all their requests or hopes."

Wesley's extract of Richard Lucas' *An Enquiry After Happiness* (volume 24 of the *CL*) includes two references to "preventing grace."

Wesley's extract of Dr. Annesley's sermon on Ecclesiastes 6:11-12 (volume 24 of the *CL*) includes the statement "GOD never denied his grace to any that were not willing to be denied; where GOD has, by preventing grace, engaged the will restlessly to desire grace, he has given a token for good that he is pleased with our importunity."

Wesley's extract of Dr. Reynolds' (sometimes bishop of Norwich) sermon on Romans 7:9 (volume 25 of the *CL*) includes the statement "When you seest a man wallow like a beast in his own vomit, dart out blasphemies against Heaven, revile the Gospel of salvation... consider, that this is thine own image, that you past the same root of bitterness in thyself, if the grace of GOD did not prevent thee." And Wesley's extract of Dr. Reynolds' sermon on I John 5:12 (volume 25 of the *CL*) includes the statement "CHRIST withholds not himself, but is ready to meet, to prevent, to attend every heart that in truth desires him."

Wesley's extract of the Devotions Wednesday through Thursday (author not indicated) (volume 25 of the *CL*) for the Office for Sunday Morning Prayer includes the prayer "PREVENT, we beseech thee, O LORD... Wesley's extract of the Office of the Saints, The Office for a Family Morning Prayer (volume 25 of the *CL*) includes the prayer "PREVENT US, O LORD... Wesley's extract of Evening Prayer, Psalm 3 (volume 25 of the *CL*) includes the prayer "We beseech thee to hear us, O LORD. That it may please thee to pardon the sins of our life, and so to prevent and assist us with thy grace..."

Wesley's extract of Dr. Robert South's sermon on John 15:15 (volume 26 of the *CL*) includes a reference to "preventing love" And Wesley's extract of Dr. Robert

South's sermon on I Sam 25:32-33 (volume 26 of the *CL*) includes ten(!) references to prevenient grace.

Wesley's extract of Archbishop Tillotson's sermon on John 7:39 (volume 27 of the *CL*) includes the statement "And though the SPIRIT be said to be given to them that already believe, that is, so as to dwell and reside, to take up his constant habitation and abode only in these; yet this does not exclude a preventing influence and operation of GOD's HOLY SPIRIT upon the minds of those to whom the Gospel is offered, disposing them to embrace and entertain it, and working faith in them."

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